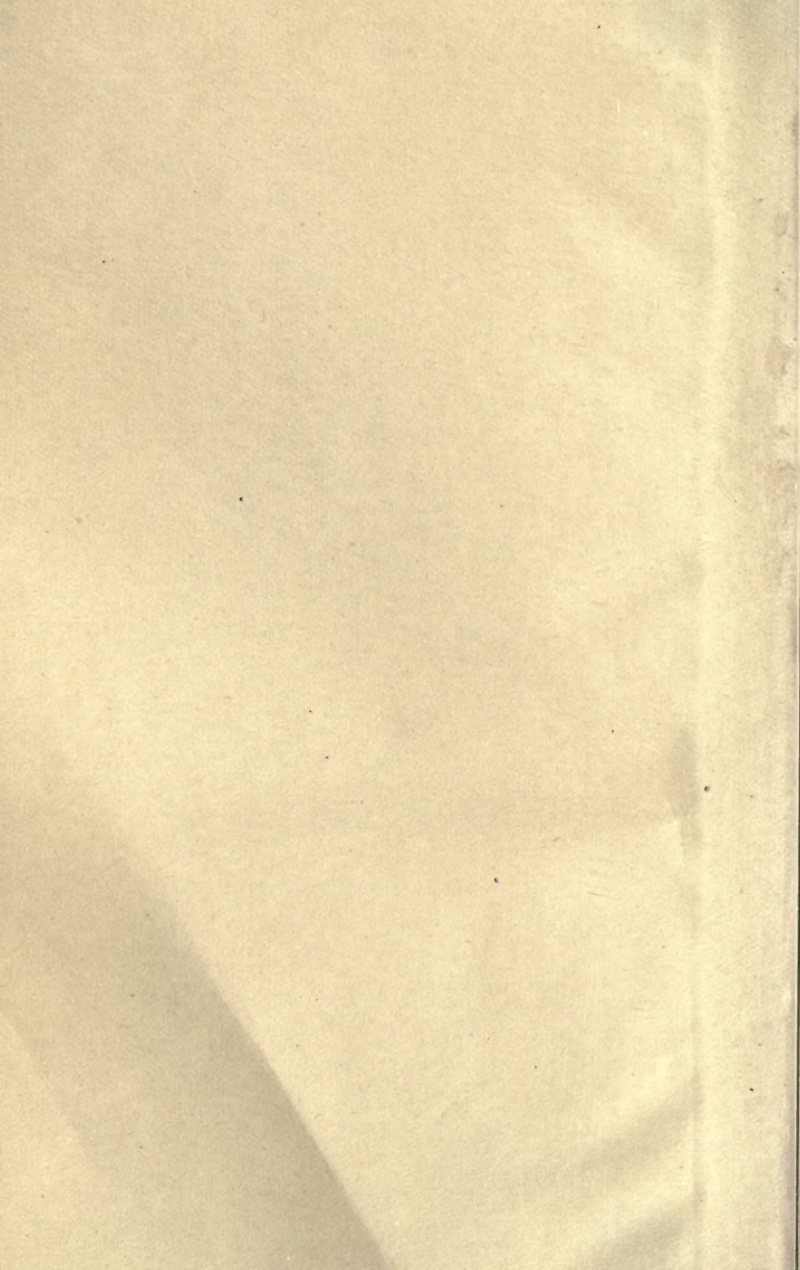


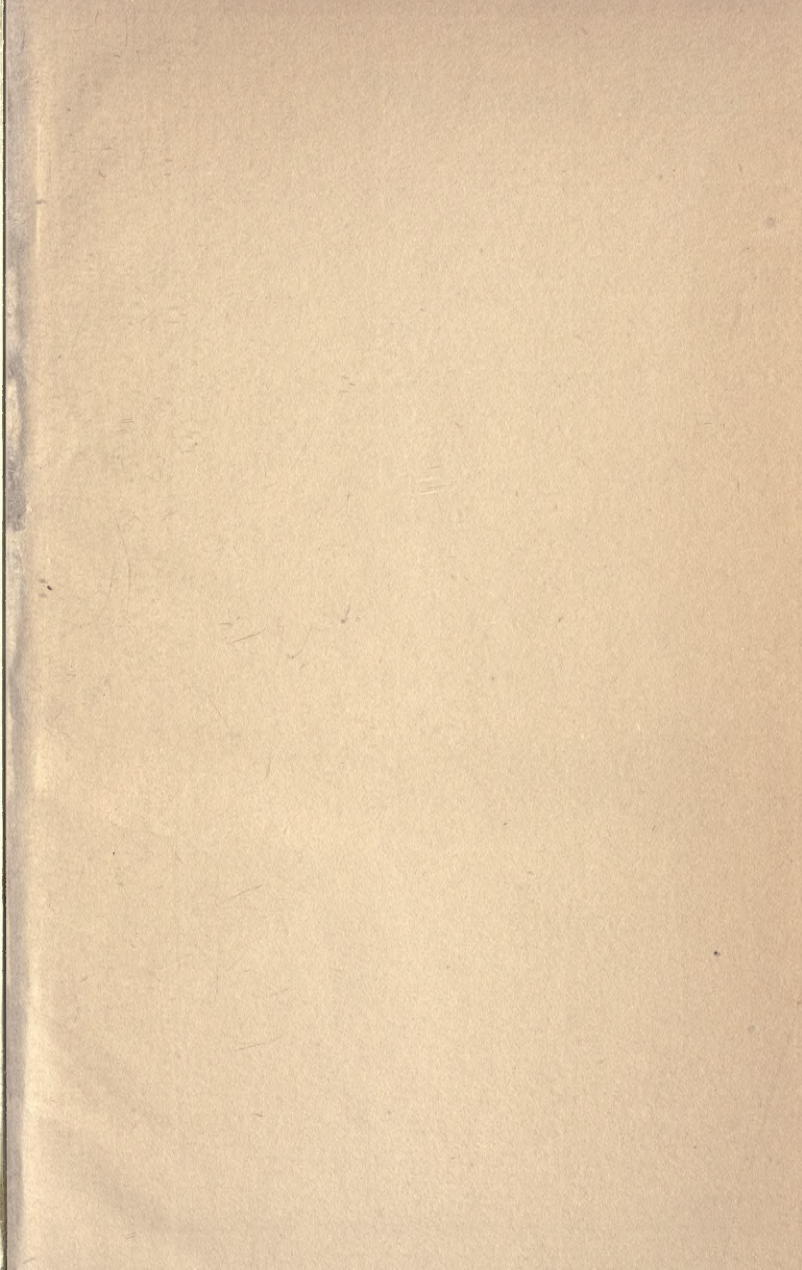


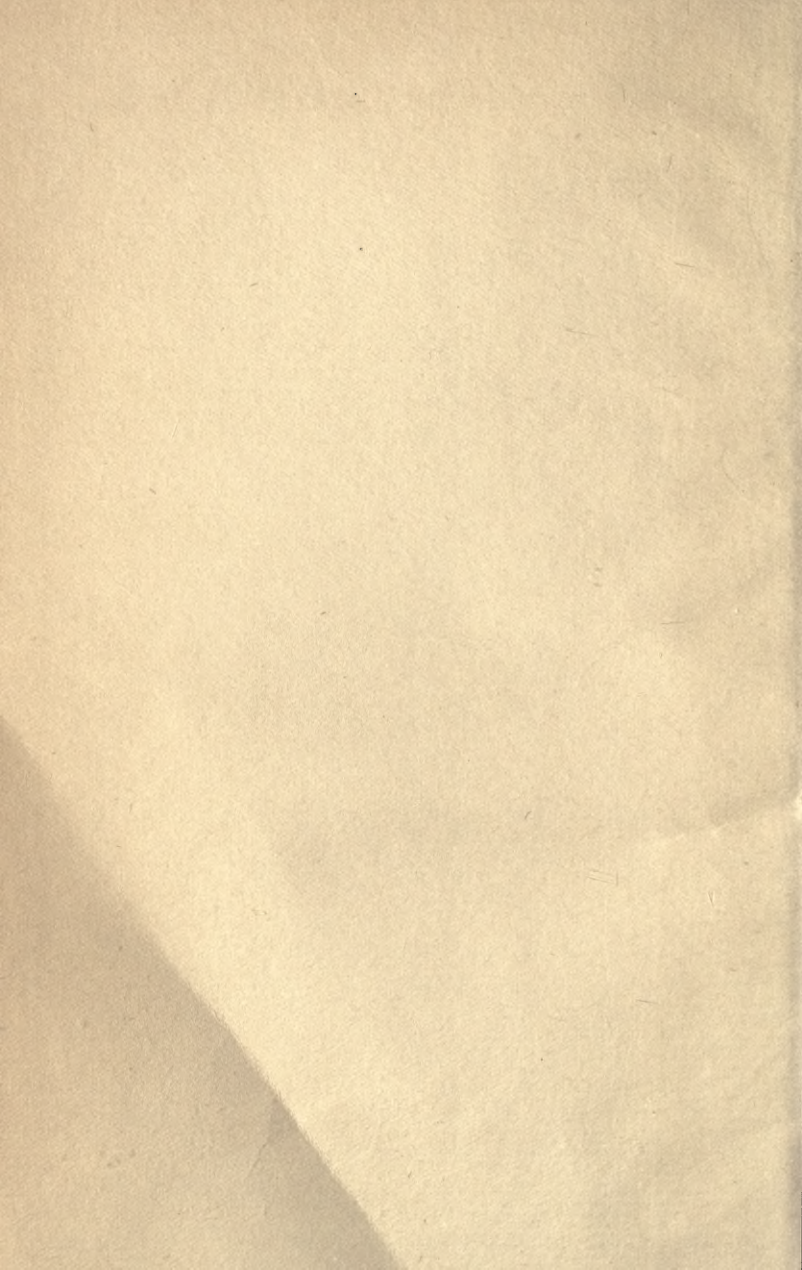
THE GREEN ALLEYS

EDEN PHILLPOTTS









The Green Alleys

NEW NOVELS

THE WORLD FOR SALE. *By Gilbert Parker.*

GILDED VANITY. *By Richard Dehan.*

A WINGED VICTORY. *By Sarah Grand.*

YOUTH UNCONQUERABLE. *By Percy Ross.*

FELICITY CROFTON. *By Marguerite Bryant.*

EARTH TO EARTH. *By Richard Dehan.*

MISS PANDORA. *By M. E. Norman.*

LONDON : WILLIAM HEINEMANN
21 Bedford Street, W.C.

The Green Alleys

A Comedy

By
Eden Phillpotts

AUTHOR OF "OLD DELABOLE," "BRUNEL'S TOWER," ETC.



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CHAPTER I

THE WEALD

IN Southern Kent are far-flung plains of the Weald that tend to seaward. On a summer day they were basking under July sunshine, while their grass-lands stretched for miles under dancing heat and a thousand mowers purred in the heart of them. The russet of the ripe meadows and the silver of the mown hay were broken by green of many hop-gardens, whose foliage reflected the light, so that the hops, heavy and dark under grey skies, were now full of a joyous radiance. Across the great plain swept also woodlands, that belted in the middle distance, with irregular passages of summer oak and elm, bossy and massive. Ridge upon ridge the trees retreated gradually until they and the pastures and tilth between were reduced and huddled together by distance, and their patterns obscured in the milky azure of summer air. No salient features marked the horizon. Level as the sea, and pure as an opal to the sky edge it sank away, shot with delicate shadow of forests, broken only by spire or tower, by the cowl of hop-oasts, or the head of a windmill, sweeping its wide pinions against the blue. Here, in this tender distance of many colours, was contrast for the splendour of the meadows and spinneys, the cattle and snowy, new-shorn sheep of every foreground.

It is a pastoral land, simple and impressive—a land of old custom and old habitations. In dignity of line and colour, depending not at all on size for their distinction, the farmsteads and hamlets stand. Brick and tile have reached their finest expression upon this plain, and nowhere

in England shall be found such harmony of tone wedded to form so fine.

Scattered through the land the hump-backed oasts stamp their sign upon it and tell of the special industry that adds fame to the Kentish Weald. Everywhere their cowls ascend, here singly, here in clusters, here as appanage to the parent farmhouse. They dominate every landscape, lift their bent shoulders in every picture and seem to plod, like broken legions of weary giants, through every league of the land.

Rivers are rare, but instead of the streamlets familiar in other scenes, this plain is fed with innumerable ponds and waterholes, some spreading to the dignity of lakes, some reduced to mere tiny tarns, where the cattle drink at the meadow-side and the moorhen makes her nest. There is abundance of water, for the Weald is thirsty, and must have wherewith to quench her thirst. The bright faces of the ponds flash everywhere—upon open fields, at orchard edge, in little woodlands hemmed with jade of willow or green of hops; beside cot, or farm, whose whitewashed face, barred with old timber, is reflected in the shining surface of the water.

Silence broods upon these plains at hot noontide, and one may walk over a mile of field path without meeting a fellow man. There are even lonely tracts where the roof-tree is not seen and Nature revels, unconscious that the greatest city in the world lies but fifty miles away.

Southward this plain of Kent breaks suddenly, and at an edge of the plateau there stand two farms, distant from each other a quarter of a mile. The first faces upon the level and looks north, with broad lands ranging round about. Its meadows subtend the dwelling and extend among far-flung avenues of elms; while other great fields fall into the fertile vale behind. The second dominates the valleys and stands piled up grandly at hill crest with its orchards and hop-gardens nestling beneath.

Bugle Farm, the first named, lies on a bye-road, and its

wide grazing grounds extend before it. They hold an open pond that reflects the dayspring and images the stars. On hot summer mornings the water sends up a steam before the face of the dwelling, and the meadow flats are white with the smoke thereof. There is a ceaseless music of swallows, who come hither for clay with which to build their nests under Bugle's eaves.

The farmhouse ascends in three gables, and at their angles, on a cream-white ground, is tracery of ancient timbers in patterns of cross and horseshoe painted black. Small windows, ivy-browed, peep from the face of the building, and above them are perched medieval faces carved in stone. The pile is finely crowned by one tall and massive chimney-stack, and above each gable ascends a little spire of carven wood which lightens the whole. Above the door a hunter's horn is set in stone, and on either side of the entrance a sleeping lion of granite lies. They look as though they had slumbered since creation, and by no means reflect the spirit of a busy homestead.

To the rear opens another great pool under willows; left of Bugle stretch groves of apple and plum trees; while behind rises a coppice that gives upon rolling grasslands, where hay was now being cut and garnered. Like the sea there rolled out a fifty-acre field ripe for the mowers, and beneath it, in the valley bottom, spread stony land green with the stools of pollarded chestnut and hazel. For here, too, flourished a harvest, and every tenth year from these copses were cut many a tall legion of hop poles. To the west of Bugle fell waste land—a region of scrub and fern loved by the rabbits and churn owl—while round about there stood byres and barns under tile, or silver-bright tin; which completed the picture of the farm.

It exhibited a stately simplicity, typical inside and out of solid building and spacious planning unknown to-day. The chambers were large and airy, with many windows; but the ceilings, crossed with great beams, were low. The hall, however, was lofty and ascended to the roof. On

either side of it dwelling-rooms opened, cool and sweet, and behind them was the house-place, whose windows opened upon a great brick-yard. In the midst of it stood a lycium bush—perhaps the largest in Kent. The graceful shrub flung its wands every way as a fountain falls, and on the drooping arms there shone a myriad little purple blossoms, followed in autumn by orange-red berries.

Great silence reigned over Bugle at this noon hour. The place appeared deserted, and only a few fowls picked and clucked about it. Cows, avoiding the sun glare, lay beside the pond under the willows; young pigs were in the orchard. The poultry, finding none to fright them, entered the kitchen and challenged the attention of a solitary man who occupied it. By the table he sat in thought, his chin on his hand. But the incursion of the game fowls roused him. He rose, drove them out, and then went out himself.

CHAPTER II

POMFRET OF BUGLE

NATHAN POMFRET, master of Bugle Farm, now descended to his great hay-field where a dozen men and women were at work. He was a tall, heavily-made man, and his height, combined with weight, imposed upon him deliberation of action. His mind also moved deliberately. He was dark, and though his head would have been found of normal size, the immense breadth of his shoulders and depth of his chest appeared to dwarf it. His face was clean-shaved and his hair curly. He looked forty years old, yet was in reality but thirty-two. He wore no hat, and his hands were thrust into the pockets of a Norfolk jacket. His knickerbockers showed the mightiness of his thighs and legs. The great man had brown eyes of a serious expression, and a forehead already a little furrowed. Yet he was of cheerful spirit, and did not lack humour. His mouth was genial and kindly—the mouth of one who takes a friendly interest in the world—an interest higher than that represented by his own fortune alone.

Nathan Pomfret suffered under some disabilities, for fate was pleased to play him a harsh trick before he was born. His parents did not wed until after that event. But the accident had neither soured his nature nor unsteadied a steadfast outlook. Indeed, as he could argue very rationally, the circumstance which set him in such uneven relations with his fellow-men, might only be laid to man's account. For his part he was not prepared to indict any laws more far-reaching than the law of the land, or quarrel with any mightier ordinance than that which dead men had made aforetime, and which living men still

suffered to disgrace the statute book of a free country. Save for interest in the abstract question, this wronged individual troubled himself but little with it. He had taken his own line long ago, and now wasted no sentiment on what could not be altered, as represented by his own circumstances. But that generations unborn must similarly suffer caused him regret, and the little he could do to advance a spirit growing against the outrageous and reactionary laws—that Nathan Pomfret very gladly did. For he perceived that existing conditions created a general impression averse from those situated as he was, and while the spirit awakened might be merely negative—while no man or woman would perhaps have confessed to so illogical an emotion—yet, in practice, it existed, and could not be denied. For law often stifles reason, and the steady strain of an accepted order of things in time deters all but the most fearless thinkers from examining or questioning that order. The instinct of man is to rely upon the past, its prescriptions and proscriptions. He quits the old positions unwillingly, and it demands both patience and courage to convince him that they have become untenable. This at least is a dominating instinct of the Anglo-Saxon genius; and Pomfret suffered from a cruel and fatuous enactment long since rescinded by every other civilized nation than his own. But heredity is a mightier force than any state regulation designed to control it, and this man's heart flamed with an instinct to which his situation might have been supposed fatal. In some natures, indeed, pride of birth had doubtless been slain before Pomfret's misfortune of birth, but in his case native inspiration and instincts went unimpaired. Fate could lift no barriers and chance could offer no opposition to the delicate distinction of his mind in this matter, and certain privileges of blood, which the law denied him in substance, were none the less appreciated by him in spirit. They could form no part of his physical life, for he stood outside them; but not all the law, or the prophets either, as he sometimes said, could prevent

him from partaking of a spiritual communion with those of his own race and establishing between them and himself relations that rooted far deeper than the secular laws which sundered them.

Now Pomfret went down to his hay-field, where laboured a dozen men and women. The business of gathering the hay was proceeding in all stages. Ricks began to rise; the grass was being cut by two machines, and while carts gathered it, women, working in the midst of the great field, tossed it with forks to dry. As yet twenty acres out of forty were cut, but the weather held hot and clear, and the fallen hay soon went to the ricks. The giant field rose and fell in noble undulations, and Pomfret, swiftly descending, stopped now to talk to one labourer, then to another.

At noon a whistle blew, and the people ceased from work and sought the shadow of a rick and a wain, piled with hay, that had just arrived beside it. The master was come to take his mid-day meal with them, and now he sat beside an old woman and a girl, while round about congregated the other hay-makers.

Out in the deserted field the grass-cutter still stood, but the horses had been drawn to the shadow of a hedge and munched in their nose-bags. A few dogs ran about leaping, kangaroo-like, through the hay after rabbits.

"How's William, Sarah?" asked the farmer of his nearest neighbour.

"Finding the weather too hot for him. He'll be better when we get a drop of rain. Rain acts on William like it acts on the grass, don't it, Nina?"

She turned to the girl beside her.

Old Miss Sarah Dunk was thin and grey, but her face brimmed with intelligence, and she appeared to be wiry and active. She could pitch hay still, though not as well as young creatures.

The girl, Nina, her niece, admitted that Uncle William was always comforted by a shower of rain.

"It soothes him," she said. "He likes to hear it dripping off everything. He'll sniff to coming rain like a dog, and always knows when it's in the air."

Nina was flaxen and of a slight build. She was very hot with her exertions, and fanned herself with her sun-bonnet. A man beside her pressed her to eat, but she shook her head.

"I must bide a bit till I'm cooler, Mr. Hook," she said.

Johnny Hook, a flamboyant person, enjoyed a great sense of his own importance, and patronized all the world. He could not help it. Even his working clothes had touches of the dandy, and his red hair was oiled and parted in the middle, his moustache was curled up at the points. He prided himself that, however hard he worked, he never grew untidy.

"You do get hot," he said to Nina. "Now I can stand to work all day and never turn a hair."

"Because you think more of your hair than your work, I reckon," answered a little, shrivelled-up man, who sat on the other side of Nathan Pomfret. The master grinned.

"That's right, Billy Beken," he said. "If you don't turn a hair, Johnny, then it's very certain you don't turn my hay."

Another man spoke. He was grey and elderly. He owned to sixty years, but had numbered more. This majestic figure might have passed for a patriarch. His face was large and Jove-like, with wide grey eyes that gazed straight from a network of wrinkles. His mouth and chin were hidden by a heavy grey moustache and a beard that swept to the bottom of his waistcoat. His broad back was rounded and his hands were gnarled. He spoke in a deep voice, and ate his food from a blue china bowl. He was a hop-drier, but that important work only occupied a short part of his time, and for the rest of the year he laboured at other agricultural pursuits.

"Work's gone back," he said, "and it takes two young men to do what one did when I was young. Tools were

heavier then; but we old chaps can handle them still, though they'd break the back of slight things like Johnny here."

"Did you use to do more work than we, Eli? That's the question," said Mr. Hook.

"A plucky lot more," answered the veteran; "for why? Firstly, because we had more muscle and bone to put behind it—more driving power—and second, because our work came first and we were contented with enough pleasure to salt life. But you chaps—you drown life under pleasure, and your work is only a means to get more pleasure. You're all for yourselves and never for the masters. You think masters a necessary evil and the needful means to your own fun and amusement. We old men filled the place it had pleased God to call us to fill, and we was a darned sight more loyal to the hand that fed us than you of to-day—so I dare say the masters felt kinder to us. We earned what we got, and we made it serve our needs, and we didn't part our hair in the midst and boast we never sweated to our work. No doubt we wasn't well educated enough for that."

"And just the same with the maidens," declared Miss Dunk. "They run mad after pleasure—so called—and the mistresses will tell you that nothing's safe from 'em. When we washed up, we washed up and gave the proper time to the job; but nowadays the crockery properly groans for its life, and 'tis devil take the hindmost. If what the maidens broke was stopped out of their wages, they'd be a poor lot nowadays. And all for what? To get off to their pleasures."

"That's because we've got more spirit in us than you old people," argued Johnny Hook. "We're more self-respecting and better taught; and we know we're the backbone of the nation. And we want to be ourselves, not just tools for other people to use and make money from. We're built of as good stuff as our masters, and they know it. And the best masters move with the times, and pay us

better, and give us more leisure hours to improve ourselves. And it's only a poor beast of burden would pretend that work in itself is anything but a necessary nuisance."

Miss Dunk regarded Johnny with aversion.

"That's the stuff you all bleat now," she said. "And it sickens me. Improve yourselves! Where? In the picture palaces and pubs. It's all noise and emptiness and dissatisfaction and grumbling. Instead of doing your duty in the place you was called to do it by the catechism, you scamp it, and sneer at it, and talk about equality. And if anything showed all men weren't equal, it would be the likes of you. You're a very worthless thing and everybody well knows you are."

But Johnny Hook had his own reasons for not quarrelling with Miss Dunk. There was a pause, broken only by the clink of plates and basins. Men drew the corks from little tin cans and drank. The talk ran on strength, and a dark, quiet young fellow, one Henry Honeysett, head man at Bugle, spoke.

"I reckon master's the strongest man ever I saw," he said. It was spoken merely as an opinion, and without any sense or tone of flattery to Nathan Pomfret.

A few regarded the farmer frankly and critically, and Eli Samson, the old hop-drier, agreed with Honeysett.

"For simple strength, yes."

"You were as good, Eli," said Pomfret.

"No, not for simple strength," declared the elder. "I could have held you at cleverness and even weight-lifting, having the knack of balance; but for simple, brute strength—in a straight blow or such like—I never saw your equal."

"You could box too, once, Pomfret," said Mr. Beken.

A girl spoke. She sat by another girl, her sister. They were fine, massive young women with gipsy blood in them. Susan and Milly Daynes lived at Biddenden, two miles away, and were nieces of Eli Samson.

"I mind when you came along the road one night and

a man was being rude to me, you got out of your cart and knocked him into the hedge with one blow, Mr. Pomfret," she said.

The master laughed.

"That sort only want to be hit once, Milly," he answered; "and as to strength, yes, but for boxing, no. Not quick enough. If I land, it's all right; but no good twelve-stone man would ever let me land. And, meantime, they land on me."

"You've landed once or twice, however," remarked Henry Honeysett.

"And always first," declared Samson with approval.

"There's only one way in a row," explained Pomfret, mildly, "and that's to begin. Shakespeare knew, Eli; what didn't he know for that matter? He says, 'Don't go fire-eating and looking for trouble; but if it comes your way, wade in and don't stop till the trouble's over, or you're outed.' Not his language of course, but that's the sense."

"Right," said Eli. "When the beer's in and the air's thick, and the boys are fairly spoiling for it, then, if they're in the wrong and you're in the right, as nearly always happens, the way is to begin."

"There's a time for words and a time for deeds," continued the master; "and when a man's past seeing argument, you must make him feel it instead—if you can. For instance, d'you remember at High Halden Fair a few years back, when Adams wanted his bar cleared at 'The Windmill'?"

"I do, for one, and shall never forget it," said Billy Beken.

"I heard about it," declared Mr. Samson.

"I and Billy there were the only men in sight of soberness," proceeded Pomfret, "and by chance there were six outsiders and a few of us locals in the bar at the time. The strangers were card-sharpers no doubt, and they got very nasty in drink, and Adams knew they meant trouble. So he said, 'Now, you chaps, you've had your whack, and

we're wanting your room and not your company.' Meek as a mouse he said it, but what did they care for that? So when Adams told them to shunt and they said they'd see him damned first, I got up and flung the door open and set to work without a word. I hit one down, but not too hard for him to get up again, and then one took a quart pot to the back of my head and I hit him down real hard. Then one more blow I struck, in the face of the biggest, and the others didn't worry, but led the way out. They were gone inside a minute—all except him who used the pot to me—and I carried him out and stuck him against the pump, didn't I, Billy?"

"You did," answered Samson, "and Billy often tells the tale. He says, 'When me and Mr. Pomfret put out six rogues from "The Windmill,"' and, such is his memory that he honestly believes he did his share."

"So I did," answered little Mr. Beken, "and the man that says I didn't is a liar. I held the door open and used the language."

Then came diversion, for a woman and a girl descended from the farm to the hayfield, and each carried two big jugs of cider.

Mrs. Jane Ledger was the housekeeper at Bugle—a widow of ripe age.

"Come on, Jane," cried Pomfret. "We're properly dust-dry, I can tell you."

He stopped with the people a little longer; then, when Honeysett blew his whistle and all returned to work, the master left the hayfield by a gate at the bottom, crossed the lane that ran there, and, entering another gate on the other side of the road, found himself in the hop gardens of Hill Crest, the farm that adjoined his own.

CHAPTER III

THE HOPS

Now were the hop gardens in full splendour of growth—a phase in the story that begins during late winter and culminates with the amber harvest of the fall.

As yet the burr only declared itself, and the points, presently to break into bloom, had not thickened and ended the July pageant of leaf and line. The alleys stretched away above the weald, whose colour shone almost golden under noontide sun; and the earth, in crumbled masses of pale, bright mould, extended down avenues so full of light that the chequer of leaf shadows hardly dimmed their brightness. Above, the regiments of the hops stood massive upon their twin pillars. Each pair of chestnut poles was separated from the next by six feet, but they looked closer. Tight wound the bine to the stake, getting a grip for its aerial leap aloft. The lower, mightier leaves over-lapped each other and shadowed their neighbours; they were three-lobed, and five-lobed, and serrated—the embodiment of adult health and vigour. But here and there spread the yellow dust of sulphur upon them, or the blue stain of wash, to show their splendid prosperity had not been won without pains. Their darkness reflected the sunshine, which spread light over the leaf and marked the venation. The nerves sprang downward from the mid-rib to the points of the pendant foliage, and lesser nerves branched from them.

The master bines clove to the main support, hugged the wood and left the net-work of cocoanut twine, that ran away on every side, to their laterals; but sometimes a main stem deserted the pole and set forth to decorate a swaying

rope. Then noble arches spanned the green alleys, and from them every way fell traces, streamers and threads so delicate, that they seemed no more than rays of light trembling upon the green. They flashed and swayed in every fore-ground, and made a separate picture above each furrow; while, as the ranks receded, their details vanished into one verdurous mist of golden green that ran away in tunnels of light above the shining earth.

The riot and medley, the fling and leap of their twiners and spirals; their entanglements, where hands caught hands and clasped and curled together; the drooping laterals that rained down over each stout column and flung light across it; the expression of lush, unconquerable life, now still, now agitated with the wave and twinkle of a breeze—for such phenomena words are medium too clumsy.

Overhead the great runners had reached to the top of the poles and stretched into the air seeking for fresh support. There, upon the blue, their green was dimmed a little and their last foliage came dark against the sky; but under the sun, they shone radiantly transparent, and amidst them the triumphant bine, still full of growth, turned and knotted and doubled upon itself, casting volutes and circles high and low. Such scrolls, ogee-arches, spandrels they fashioned that an architect's dream had never numbered them; and amid their traceries a thousand lovely fan-lights and oriels opened on heaven, where the hops flung their filigrane against the summer clouds.

Each living thing of all these living things embodied its own separate wonderments of festoon and loop. They were medieval in their energy, in their fret of detail and ceaseless decoration; and yet behind their riot of ornament persisted classic lines and severe forms discovered of old time and set down to endure as a joy for ever. All the great curves might be found in these courts beneath the adornment born of such abundant life. Here ran the symmetric rhythm of the main bine round the pole, and its revolving spiral wound true, with a lesser stem filling

the intervals between; here the air-flung wands wove all harmonies that could spring of circle and semi-circle and parabola; here they blended form with form and upon the summer blue drew daintiest patterns, fit only for the rose-windows of fairy palaces. And every line was living; every day saw the emerald architecture put forth new intricacies, new magic, new spires and minarets above the sturdy battlement of the hop. Along each aisle the trend of the falling laterals created a design. At a height of four feet they sprang out horizontally, then their own weight bent them downward and they fell in a curve to the earth, but turned upward again before reaching it. Thus within each lane was sketched a thousand times the outline of an upturned Greek hydria or crater; and these pedestals to every pillar supported, as it seemed, the flying buttresses above them; where greater shoots covered the trellis of fine rope, made a criss-cross pattern and lifted the arch of every aisle. From them, too, dropped a tangle of lesser bines curved every way and all turning upward at the point. Upon each thread floated little leaves and growing burrs, while above, struggling ever toward the sky, came the last streamers that waved aloft and flung themselves, singly or twined together, into the upper air. The finials faded away into nothing: one traced them into darkness or light and lost them rather than saw them end.

At human will they lifted this splendour and, while responding to man's purpose, abated no part of their intrinsic beauty and immemorial endowment. Their manifestations are many, yet none surpass this supreme glory of growth—the virgin moment before the dawn of the blossom.

Nathan Pomfret perceived this dimly. He was conscious of a gracious presence in the deserted gardens, and, as he climbed the hill again, stood a few moments to admire the hops.

Then came a man and horse to him, driving their way up one of the long green alleys. The horse was in front,

the man behind, and between them a ponderous implement—the strike-plough—drove one deep furrow down the midst of each lane.

“Is my brother come back, Rupert?” asked Pomfret of the ploughman.

“Not as I know of,” he answered. “Wasn’t there dinner-time.”

“The hops are looking brave.”

Rupert Swadling, a lantern-faced and iron-grey man of middle age, beamed at this praise, for the hops interested him a good deal more than did the master of Hill Crest. He turned his plough down the next alley, then left the handles and stood off to gaze upon the garden.

“Fine, sure enough,” he said. “I don’t want to see better, and, outside of us, you won’t see better. A proper little wood, they make sure enough. There’s nothing like ’em round Maidstone that I could see.”

“You won’t see, Rupert.”

“No, no—I’m fair to all. But if you won’t work the washer, you mustn’t expect hops like ours. We deserve ’em; though that ain’t always to say you get ’em.”

“You work till you drop—we know that.”

“And shall work till I drop. Washer above and food below—that’s the whole story of hop-growing. ’Tis ‘wash and feed’ for hops, same as it is ‘watch and pray’ for the Christian.”

Mr. Swadling plunged down the next alley, and Pomfret, ascending the hill, passed out of the gardens, crossed a steep meadow, and reached the red pile of Hill Crest farm, crowned with its oasts and fir trees.

The walls on the western side were covered with ripe, red tiles, like the roof, and here extended a long dwelling-room to the left of the main entrance. The visitor, however, made his way in by the kitchen door, which opened on the south; then, passing through the empty kitchen, he went down a passage and proceeded to the parlour by a second door. The room was low, and a noble wainscot of dark oak ascended nearly to the roof. Pictures adorned

the walls, and in one corner was a piano. The floor was of oak also, with a Turkey carpet extending in the midst. A square dining-table stood upon it, and beside the open window were two easy chairs upholstered in heavy green plush. In one, beside a work-table, sat the sole occupant of the chamber, a big woman of five-and-fifty.

Georgina Crowns had been beautiful and was still handsome. Age had brought flesh, but her face was not coarse. Her grey eyes still challenged, and her black hair, fortified by artifice, as yet revealed no touch of time. Her features were regular and immobile. There was something Greek in their placidity; but thought had left its stamp and spoiled her forehead, while, to-day, physical pain drew down her brows from their customary level. Her eyes were full in the lid, her cheeks still comely, with a natural, high colour.

But the man thought her looking pale.

"No better to-day, mother?" he asked, as he stooped and kissed her.

"No worse," she answered. "I'm hoping it won't rise to my knee, for then I must go to bed."

Mrs. Crowns had one foot in a bandage lifted to a low chair in front of her, for she was suffering from an attack of gout.

"Doctor tells me that comparatively few women get it thus," she said, "but that's cold comfort since I'm one of the few. I can feel now what my poor father used to feel. He was suffering from an attack when I told him you were my child; and it very near killed him."

"That's the danger of taking narrow views about life," said Pomfret. "If you map everything out in a mean pattern and have all your opinions cut and dried, then, when something contrary to experience comes along, it gives you such a deuce of a skaking that it hurts. If you keep your mind open, great things can go through it easy; if you keep it locked and barred, when they come, they only batter it."

"Some children teach their parents more than they learn from 'em," declared Mrs. Crowns; "and such was I. And I hope neither you nor Nicholas will ever get it—gout, I mean. Though 'tis little likely you'll both escape."

"I'm more in the line for it, having your build," he answered. "Nick's the lighter, sparer sort—more father's shape."

"But against that you've got the sense and self-control. You take exercise, and never ride where you can walk, and never drink a pint when half a pint will quench your thirst. Nick's his own enemy."

"Don't say that. He's getting sense."

She shook her head.

"You don't live with him. I'll tell you what's the matter with Nick: he's too lucky. Everything goes right, and he thinks naught's to be thanked but his own cleverness, whereas oftener than not, it's mine; and when it isn't mine, it's yours."

Pomfret laughed.

"He's clever enough—wonderful clever in many ways. A quick mind and a rare trick to turn a losing game into a winning one."

The mother shook her head.

"It's curious between you and me and Nicholas. As a rule, you'll find brothers are not of much account to each other; and more than enough reason why they shouldn't in the case of you and him; but never was such a pair, though the giving and taking is a bit one-sided."

"The friendship ain't, however."

"No—he loves you—he loves everybody. He's too like the trustful dogs, who never will believe any mortal man on two legs can be anything but a friend. He loves you and he loves me, he loves Jenny and he loves himself—something wonderful he loves himself. But the funny thing, and contrary to nature, you might say, is this: that I, his own mother, ain't blind to his faults, while you—no more than his own brother—overlook 'em far too easy."

Nathan smiled at her.

"It's your gout making you so sharp and clever, I believe," he said. "But I'm not blind to Nick's foolishness. I dress him down pretty sharp sometimes, and preach family pride and all that goes to the name of Crowns."

She looked at him with love and pain in her eyes together.

"You fine chap," she said. "You're a wonder. I wish Nicholas knew half the wonder you are."

Her wave of emotion quickened her blood and brought a throb of pain. She gave a little groan.

"Damn the thing," he said. "I wish I could take it from you."

"Get the jug off the kitchen hob. 'Tis water with poppy-heads in it; and bathe my foot, like a dear."

He hastened to obey, bared the flushed and swollen foot presently and fomented it.

"I'm ashamed you should see such a shapeless lump of flesh," she said.

"It will soon be as pretty as the other again."

He sponged the shapeless member gently, and she sighed and relaxed her tense grip on the arms of her chair. Then he wrung out cotton-wool in the basin, laid it over the foot, replaced oil-silk above it, and wrapped all up in a woollen shawl.

"To think your great paws can do it!" she said.

"Ain't you my mother?"

The thought that love was not sufficient inspiration for the mightiest effort of his heart, or the tenderest touch of his hand could never have occurred to Pomfret.

"When's Nick coming home?"

"He said yesterday, so I should think it might be to-morrow."

As she spoke a step fell upon the path outside, and both knew it.

"He's come this minute," said Nathan, and a moment

later a man entered the room, dropped a small "Gladstone" bag in the corner and turned to them.

"Why didn't you send the——?" he began, then broke off.

"Gout again, my old dear? If I'd known, I'd have been back long ago!"

He kissed Mrs. Crowns and showed solicitude. Nicholas little resembled his mother or his brother; he was of a lighter build and more delicately turned at wrist and ankle. His bones were smaller and his features finer and more quick in play of light and shade. He was fairer, too, with a light moustache and blue eyes. At present they revealed the misty look of dissipation, and his expression was a little drawn and tired. But he proved exceedingly alert and cheerful, greeted his brother warmly, and chattered while they listened to him. He had good news from London, and an accident of circumstances unforeseen promised well for hop prices. The hop gardens of Hill Crest, extending in snug valleys beneath the farm, escaped exposure, and Crowns hoped to be a fortnight ahead of the big growers at Paddock Wood and about Maidstone. According to his sanguine custom he counted his chickens before they were hatched. His mother told him so; his brother supported Nicholas.

"No," declared Nathan; "if Nick has had a run of luck, he's deserved a run of luck. He knows all father knew about hops; and that's all there is to know. And to know is not all neither. He practises what he knows, and though nobody on God's earth is lazier, between times, than Nick, none works harder when work's to be done. The hops are a picture—I saw them an hour ago; but that picture took a bit of painting, mother; and you can see very different hops within a mile."

"That's right," cried the grower. "Give me Nat for sense. Our 'Tolhurst Goldens,' and our 'Fuggles,' and our 'Prolifics,' too, beat all the rest of Kent hollow."

"What about our 'Bramblings' then?" asked Mrs.

Crowns. "Father always said they wanted more growing than all the rest, and he'd never yet known the man who could keep mould out of them."

"That's right," admitted Nicholas; "but they've come on a lot since you were in the gardens. They've all got their troubles, for that matter, and if you cast your eye over poor old Dick Harpole's hops at High Haldon, you'll see a proper hospital."

"The man can't afford to grow them," said Nathan; "but he will go on. He's got eel-worm this year and a dwarfer, dirtier, more nettle-headed, yellow lot of rubbish you won't see in the county—poor chap."

"But we're all right," summed up his brother, "and if we get a drop of useful rain—a thunderstorm or two, as seems likely—then, with the hot sun to follow and my usual luck, we ought to get pockets to London by the end of July."

"You're always for rushing things," answered his mother. "'Tis any odds, that if you hold them up they'll be worth as much again three months later."

"He likes to see his money, don't you, Nick?" asked Nathan.

"And I do see it this year," replied the younger. "I see it as clear as if every hill was hung with half sovereigns."

"A regular poet, isn't he, mother?"

"Too hopeful for a poet, I reckon," answered Mrs. Crowns. "They're downcast mostly."

The youngest of the family entered while they spoke. Jenny Crowns had been shopping at Tenterden, and now she appeared with parcels and a bottle of physic for her mother. The girl was hot and flushed. At eight-and-twenty she offered a small and youthful edition of her mother, but her face was less regular and beautiful, though more vivacity marked it.

She had some personal news.

"My friend has come," she said. "Rosa May has arrived at Tenterden along with her father. They're settling in,

and she loves Tenterden already. And I've promised to drink tea with them on Sunday, and to take you, Nat. You'll like Mr. Witherden: he's queer and out of the common; and he's quite glad to be back in the old place."

"Did you go to see Mr. Fuggles?" asked her mother, and Jenny made a face.

"No, I didn't. I was too hot. But I met him in the street. As bad luck would have it, I was looking in the jeweller's, and he spotted me, and came across and asked me if he might buy me a locket, and I said I didn't want one."

"You're a silly fool, Jen," burst out Nicholas. "Here's a good man spoiling to chuck his house and fortune into your lap, and you treat him like dirt."

"I don't know whether he's good," answered the girl; "but I do know he's old; and I'm not going to marry an old man for his money—not even to please you."

"He's not old," declared Mrs. Crowns. "Martin Fuggles has seen life and it's left a mark; but he's no older than I am—not much, any way."

"When I marry, it will be somebody who hasn't seen life, but who wants to see life—along with me," said her daughter. "I don't want to be the last bit of fun for an old man; I want to be the first bit of fun for a young one."

"Wrong," declared Mrs. Crowns. "If a young man's first bit of fun was always his last, then you couldn't do better; but it never is. With an elderly man in sight of sixty, you generally know where you are; with a boy, you never do."

"That cuts both ways," declared Nathan; "and the elderly man that takes a girl is asking for trouble."

"All depends on the girl," answered Mrs. Crowns. "There's many built to be good wives to them old enough to be their fathers. Many shine at it."

"Well, I shouldn't," said Jenny. "I've nothing against Mr. Fuggles—I'm sure he's a dear—and kindness alive to me—but marry him—never."

The talk revolved about Mr. Martin Fuggles, and Nathan rose to depart.

"I must go back to my hay," he said.

"And keep your eye on my chap, Johnny Hook," warned his brother. "He's the laziest dog on earth."

"You oughtn't to say that," replied Jenny, "for Johnny thinks you're the finest man in the world, and models himself on you in everything."

"That's why he's so lazy then, no doubt," replied Nathan.

Then Nicholas spoke again.

"I'll come in and have a bit of supper with you to-night, Nat—after eight o'clock. There'll be no food here now mother's got gout."

"Story!" cried his sister. "But of course we may all starve, so long as you're filled."

"Let Nick go hang and look to mother, Jen. Hot up the poppy-heads and bathe her foot again; and make her eat a bit."

"I've brought a nice bit of fish for her," said Jenny.

CHAPTER IV

THE BROTHERS

WHEN Peter Crowns wedded Mary Goodsall, discerning neighbours foretold failure, and suspected that natures so dissimilar would not find unity in marriage.

The woman, an only child, was proud and ambitious; the man came of ancient yeoman folk and enjoyed the possession of property. But he felt not jealous for his family name, or desirous to support the traditions behind him, for he displayed an easy nature and valued himself rather on the number of his friends than their quality. His distinction of race appealed more to his wife than himself, and while aware before marriage that he undervalued it, she believed herself strong enough to awaken in him something of her own point of view, and raise him to higher planes. She failed, and with her failure a rift widened in the lute of her love. Acerbity of temper developed in Mary, and an element of obstinacy appeared in Peter. She never bated her determination to lift him above his social position; he tended to go below it, winning from his inferiors a measure of flattery, which appealed to him, and which his equals and those above him withheld. Thus she irritated him and he maddened her. After they had been married five years, they began to speak plainly and criticize each other. Once he reminded her that if he had always sought above him, instead of beneath, he would never have married her. For that she did not forgive him.

Under the rule of Peter Crowns his ancestral home of Hill Crest neither waxed nor waned. He was a hop master, and the lean and fat years came; but he held his own, paid his way, and was regarded by his neighbours as a prosperous

man, by his wife as a failure. He coveted certain property that adjoined his own, and was able to acquire it by a fortunate accident. A childless uncle, who dwelt at Biddenden near by, died, and Peter Crowns inherited his small estate. He sold it and with the proceeds enlarged his own property by ten acres of good hop lands.

His wife bore him no children, and the circumstance embittered her and disappointed him. But the regret that he honestly laboured to conceal, she blamed him for showing. He did the best a garrulous and emotional man could do to hide the misfortune, and her unjust indictment further estranged them. Both began to nurse grievances, partly real and partly fancied; but while the woman revealed hers to everybody, the man told his to one alone. Her distresses marred the beauty of Mary Crowns—a blonde prettiness in no case destined to endure. At thirty, discontent homed in her blue eyes; her fair forehead was furrowed, and the corners of her small mouth were pressed down by lines from her nostrils. She had failed with her life's adventure, and she knew it. In measure of her assurance of success was the poignancy of her defeat. She had failed in her attempt to lift Crowns above his own order into one really less distinguished; she had failed to inspire him with her ideals of upper middle-class life and manners; she had failed of motherhood. The sum total of these disasters she placed to her husband's credit, and while justly charging against his nature and inherent character the extent of her unsuccess, unjustly regarded herself as an ill-used heroine, whose native nobility, genius and promise had all been frustrated by an inferior helpmate and an adverse environment. She held herself one who had brought worthier ideals than his own to a man incapable of achieving them; she pitied herself exceedingly and expected the world to do so. She presently regarded her mortification as the work of a cruel and inexorable fate. Then she glorified herself into a queen of tragedy, and, confounding perspective, after the manner of self-absorbed

people, she came to believe her sufferings almost unique in their many-sided woe. And since her own affairs alone occupied Mary Crowns, she thrust them remorselessly upon her acquaintance, with the result that her circle narrowed. If one thing is less interesting to the bulk of men and women than their friends' good fortune, it is the bad fortune of their friends; and "mournful Mary" became the general nickname for the wife of Peter Crowns. Gradually the defection of those she regarded as her intimates grew into a new grievance, and she found herself, at thirty-two, a woman very much alone in the world. Her husband attempted to stem the tide of her melancholy, but he could not, and his repeated failures gradually begot indifference. He refused to blame himself for his wife's inherited qualities—qualities that another life with another husband might have masked; and since, after such deliberation as his volatile bent of mind could achieve, Peter Crowns honestly convinced himself the fault was not his, he turned without sense of guilt to find sympathy and admiration elsewhere. For he was that sort of man who needs both for his comfort; and being handsome, kindly, and a favourite with women, the consolation that he sought fell swiftly into his life.

To say that he endeavoured deliberately to find such consolation is to do him wrong. While conscious of his failure to please his wife, he made no calculated effort in any other direction, and it had never occurred to him to seek another woman, who could give him what Mary could not. But when Georgina Pomfret appeared upon the scene and after he had spoken with her thrice, Crowns fell in love with her. She was the daughter of one Nathan Pomfret, a Maidstone innkeeper, known to Peter years before he made the girl's acquaintance. He was introduced to her first in the train, when he and her father met by chance, both bound to London. Then he dined on a Sunday at "The Cross Keys," Maidstone, and a week later, found himself taking a walk with the girl alone.

In six months Georgina was his mistress and loved the

ground he walked upon. A well educated woman for her position, and one without illusions, she had seen and studied mankind from behind the bar of a market inn; but she had never met the like of Peter. She was honest and high-minded; but she owned to no prejudice that this, her first love, was not powerful enough to sweep away. She shared the grand experience with Peter, and he very soon worshipped her, for he found her bring such delight into his life as he had neither known nor supposed within reach of man. The past was watery moonlight compared with the sunshine of the present.

They kept their union a secret from all eyes, and Peter, after the first inevitable discomfort of unfamiliar deceit, found his self-respect return exceedingly quickly. He condoned his conduct to himself with ease.

Mary suspected nothing, and her husband, set aglowing by fires she knew not of, appeared to her in a more favourable light, and even revealed some new considerations for her ambitions. Georgina inspired him to this course, and presently she told him something else.

He learned that it was not he who must be blamed for his childless marriage. But his lover kept her secret and departed to take a holiday with an imaginary old school friend in Cornwall. Peter visited her on two occasions at Penzance, when he was supposed to be selling his hops to the factors in London. A son was born, and Georgina welcomed the baby with rejoicing, while its father began to consider that it was time his wife knew the truth. Though absolutely indifferent to the world's opinion of his conduct, and much gratified at the experience of fatherhood, the man perceived that Mary Crowns could not be expected to share this elation. He was only concerned to save her pride as far as might be possible under the circumstances. He felt heartily sorry for her, and feared that she would turn his achievement into a supreme tragedy. It looked indeed as though poor Mary must be called to taste in grim earnest the bitter fruit that she always fancied was at her lips.

"The dear woman thinks she's the most unhappy, unfortunate, forlorn, abused, misunderstood thing on God's earth," Peter said to Georgina; "and now she'll find all her fancied troubles were none at all seen alongside this."

He added, in response to the mother's question, an assurance that he had not the faintest shadow of an idea how Mary would take the truth, or whether, indeed, she would take it at all.

Then Georgina prevailed with him to say nothing, and, for the present, keep his secret from his wife. At the moment he promised; but in practice he found it impossible. It seemed that their little world must learn the fact, since Georgina would not give up her child and Mr. Crowns had no desire that she should do so. She proposed returning home with the infant and declining to name the father, but this Peter would not allow.

They felt no pang of shame, and only regretted that their action must give pain to other people.

Then Mary Crowns fell ill, and chance so ordered the matter that she was never called upon to know the truth. Finding her threatened with danger, her husband kept silence, and bade Georgina continue to stop in Cornwall until his wife grew better, or worse. Mary's health declined, and in three months she was doomed. He nursed her night and day, mourned her sufferings, and endured genuine grief untinctured with remorse.

She died in peace, and he wept beside her corpse, despite his thankfulness that she was dead. Those who knew them best were glad for her and not sorry for her husband. An early grave seemed the right and seemly end for the disappointments of "mournful Mary"; while none was sorry to reflect that the mirthful and pleasure-loving Crowns would presently pluck up heart again and find life worth the living. Many indeed calculated from the first how long he would delay a second marriage; and while superficial students of character foretold that one experience

must suffice him, those who better understood the man declared that a year would be the limit of his widowhood.

He married Georgina in a year; they went to Cornwall for their honeymoon and brought back with them an adopted child. Some suspected; some regarded it as a piece of typical Crowns eccentricity. Peter expressed indifference to the infant, and explained that the mother was a friend of his wife. The mother had perished at its birth, and Georgina had desired to adopt the child, whose father was already dead. A wealth of detail they advanced to support the story, and many argued that it would be unchristian to doubt it. Overtly it was received and accepted as true. Only one other beside themselves actually knew the facts. Nathan Pomfret, Georgina's father, was told after the marriage, and for pride he kept his daughter's secret. But for hate he never forgave her, or her husband, and never saw her again after she came to reign at Hill Crest. She named her son after him and attempted to win his forgiveness; Peter also did what he might to change the publican's opinion; but he failed and Nathan Pomfret died unforgiving. The baby had been duly christened Nathan; but presently was born another son to Georgina, and her husband began to perceive the thing that had happened. His wife had warned him of the danger under which their eldest born must labour, but he allayed her anxieties, and doubted not that British justice would come to the rescue. In due course, however, he learned that the law regarded his child as a living cipher without duty towards, or claim against, his parents. His eldest child would not be next-of-kin to him; his firstborn was nameless under the law—*nullius filius*—the son of nobody—in-capable of being heir and possessing no inheritable blood, despite the fact that his parents were man and wife. Peter Crowns plunged into the subject and soon muddled himself with many law books. But they offered cold comfort, and only confirmed the scandal. He found that of old the Church had fought this infamy and inveighed against dis-

tinctions which possessed no shadow of excuse in reason or justice; but it had fought in vain. Parliament abolished the old, reasonable law of legitimation by subsequent marriage, and the enactment stood comprehensive, hideous, foul, unsupported by any honourable being on earth—a monument of injustice, an opprobrium to human reason, a disgrace to British civilisation.

Mr. Crowns was now divided between the frantic desire to trumpet the failure of justice from the house-tops and the necessity to keep his mouth shut for the credit of his wife and of himself. But here she was stronger than her husband, and he found that she attached no importance whatever to the original lie. Indeed, she pointed out that the truth was stamped on the features of her elder son, and that every intelligent person had long ago discovered the three-year-old Nathan was Georgina's firstborn. Then Crowns ran about for sympathy and found none. Men laughed at him and chaffed him; for his wife they evinced a sort of uneasy respect, finding her superior to the conventions; but the admiration for her courage was combined with distrust of her morals. Mothers blamed her less than the fathers of families; and the latter only based their strictures on the position as it now affected her child. They held that Crowns ought to have learned these things before and not after getting a natural son. As for Peter, he pursued his inquiries, and on learning that Act of Parliament can render the individual legitimate, was inspired to fight for an act. But his resources were unequal to such a step, and presently, modifying his enterprise, he bombarded the clergy of his acquaintance, reminded them how the Church had protested without avail at this infamy of old, and urged them to open the question before the heads of the Church, that a bill might be brought in to ensure legitimation by subsequent marriage. To sit down silently under this evil he declared a disgrace to religion. It was as bad as complicity, seeing that the Church undoubtedly possessed power to right the wrong. The Church, by

preserving an attitude of indifference, was aiding the State to martyr childhood and assisting at a sacrifice of innumerable innocents. The clergymen he approached of course declined to help him, and he scorned the State religion from that day, and never entered a church again.

Henceforward he flouted England, to the mild discomfort of his circle, and when men praised Britain's justice—her instinct for fair play, her support of right as against might in her attitude to national and civic questions—he would ask, "What of my first-born son?"

His second boy was named Nicholas, and when, two years later, Georgina bore him a daughter, the girl was called Jenny.

With respect to his estates, Peter Crowns learned that it lay in his power to cut the entail and leave them as he pleased; but the need to do so was not immediate, and he postponed the necessary expense—a procrastination that ultimately left his sons as we find them. For he did nothing until the boys were old enough to understand the situation; and then he found that his elder son developed his own ideas on the subject.

The facts were made clear to Nathan on his fifteenth birthday. He had until then been left in ignorance of the truth concerning his status in his father's house. His attitude to the truth at that tender age was one of indifference. For the time he evinced no particular chagrin; nor did it alter his affection for his brother, but as the years passed, and he became of age, the youth took his own line, and did that which astonished his mother and pleased his father greatly. Justice yielded certain protection to the elder son under his peculiar circumstances, and the case of himself and his legitimate brother was met by it and provided for. It lay in his power to succeed his father as master of Hill Crest, but only with his brother's collusion and agreement. The law permitted a natural son to succeed to his parents' estate, even though a legitimate son existed, provided that legitimate son took no steps to

prevent it and made no effort to assert his claim against his bastard brother. This fact had operated with Peter Crowns and postponed his intention legally to alter the situation as it touched his family. It was understood by his wife and himself that, at his death, Nathan would take his place without let or hindrance from Nicholas. He planned the future thus, and felt no fear that any complication would arise to confound his purpose. The boys grew up close friends, and if the younger, being modelled on his father's lines, did not reciprocate to the full the unbounded regard of his brother, to the limits of his lighter nature Nicholas loved Nathan, and never questioned the justice and propriety of the future plans, even when he was old enough to understand his own power to upset them.

But the first-born of Georgina Pomfret was cast in a different pattern, and though a sense of humour and a love of life tinctured his philosophy, he took existence seriously and proved an introspective spirit. He developed a strong will and definite opinions. It is possible that had the facts of his social existence and legal outlawry been explained to him only on his majority, the man might have taken them differently; but they were made clear at an age when the mind is not synthetic, and facts are not weighed in their ultimate significance. He loved his brother, and was not overwhelmed to learn the difference that existed between them; while the younger, still less able to appreciate the circumstances, felt merely puzzled. As he grew older Nicholas accepted without question his father's ordinance, and understood that his elder brother would succeed to Hill Crest. Thus, by the time that the natural son of Peter and Georgina Crowns was of an age to measure the extent of his own ill-fortune, it had so long been a part of his knowledge that no personal bitterness or shock sprang from it.

He deplored the law, because it seemed to him the law was unjust; but he made no moan concerning his own situation. Neither did he blame his parents when he came

to man's estate. By irony of chance and bent of character, his mind developed keen loyalty to his family, and the doings of his father's race challenged his interest. Herein appeared a source of ceaseless wonder to Peter, for neither he nor his younger son, Nicholas, found the records of the family interesting. But Nathan, despite circumstances which might have been strong to smother any social enthusiasm, was really proud of the name of Crowns; followed it through archives and old documents; sought for it in records of the yeoman folk of his county; hunted it down on graves and cenotaphs. Herein atavism was manifest, and the master of Hill Crest remembered that an uncle had displayed like predilections. But Peter Crowns shared them not, and Nicholas laughed at them.

Then Nathan reached the age of twenty-five and took a remarkable step. We have said that his action pleased his father, though it might have been expected to anger him; but when Nathan renounced his patrimony, declined the proposed arrangement, and determined that he would abide by his position, Peter Crowns speedily fell in with his elder son's determination. And this he did because ere now he much preferred Nicholas—a son cast in his own pattern. Nathan's action was remarkable, yet proper to his independent character. Alive to the complications of illegitimacy, aware that he was for ever debarred from the privilege of his blood, he determined to renounce the name also. No pique prompted to this course; he judged such a step likely to avoid future complications, and though fearing not to be at the mercy of his younger brother, resented the legal need to be so and chose rather to decline any such invidious position. His very respect for the name of Crowns and contempt for the law that made him a pariah in his father's house inspired him to this strong step, and by taking it he involved his family in no embarrassment, for the reason that the truth about him had long been apprehended by everybody. The fact became established as a fragment of local knowledge, and since his

mother and father were very popular, they had suffered no tangible diminution of friendship and regard from their acquaintance. The people rather sympathised with them in the situation, and none pretended to conceal his sympathy for the elder son. For the sake of the family, however, many regretted his action, because the country-side believed that, as head of the race, Nathan was likely to cut a better figure than his less stable brother. They held it a wilful and mistaken abnegation on the elder's part, not understanding his character.

At five-and-twenty, then, the elder determined to be called Crowns no more. He chose his mother's surname, and was henceforth legally known as Nathan Pomfret. His independence took him further. Up to the present he had lived with his family as accepted successor of Hill Crest; now he decided to depart from his home, and left it to Peter Crowns to determine the nature of his future position. Thus far he had worked without wages; now, since he proposed to take his own way and free the ground for Nicholas, who until this time had played rather than worked, Nathan approached his father and invited him to determine the course of his future actions. He asked for nothing, but was prepared to receive what Peter might be pleased to give. He also undertook to obey his father with respect to the future, as far as his own views permitted him to do so.

The elder, secretly pleased by this determination, in that he better liked Nicholas, accepted the wish of his son, that Nathan's career must by no means be identified with Hill Crest. Georgina also saw that it would be wiser for the elder to go his own way, so that when the future was fulfilled the heir might reign unencumbered by sentimental difficulties. She loved both her sons equally, but she respected Nathan more than his brother, and, looking ahead, assisted him at this juncture to take steps she guessed would strengthen the possibilities of future well-being for all of them.

Bugle simplified the problem. This grazing farm, that adjoined Hill Crest to the west, fell vacant. Only the public road to Tenterden separated the properties, and since Nathan Pomfret was perfectly equal to conducting and controlling Bugle, to Bugle he went. But not without hesitation. He feared that he might be too close to his brother; whereupon Georgina Crowns, with some intuition, warned him that for the sake of Nicholas, he could not be too close. His father willingly rented Bugle for him, and devoted half the profits of a successful hop year to the purchase of stock. Then Nathan took up the new work, fought with neglected land, and gradually marked the dawn of promise brighten over his industry. Save for the help of neighbours and a head man skilled in cattle, he trusted to himself. His father knew nothing of such work, for Hill Crest relied entirely upon hops. Both farms grew fruit; but damsons, apples, cherries, are a small matter at best, for the lean years mean failure, the fat years are too fat, and a glut, shared by the district, brings prices to nought, so that often fine crops pay for little more than picking.

Nathan Pomfret did reasonably well, and in five years was able to pay his own rent and free his father of any responsibility. He turned over a good deal of money and farmed intelligently, but did not find that he saved much, and did not hunger to do so. Meantime Nicholas Crowns learned the business of hop-growing and bettered his instruction. In this matter at least he was neither lazy nor indifferent. He put all his energy into the work on which his future prosperity depended, and, with the sanguine spirit of youth, investigated what was being done for hop culture, the latest ideas and experiments in soils and breeding. His father, having still a young mind, encouraged him, and even the great growers granted that no better hops ever went to market than those from Hill Crest.

Then, during a period of prosperity, Peter Crowns came

to his end by sudden accident. There fell a winter when the great Mill Pool near Tenterden was frozen over and folk travelled from afar to skate upon it. The more dangerous depths under overhanging trees, where a current moved and the ice was uncertain, had been protected with warnings; but on a night of torch-light skating, Mr. Crowns, who enjoyed the sport, missed the caution and proceeded upon thin ice. It broke under him. Nicholas and Jenny were with their father, but not beside him at the time, and when shouts and swift movement of torches told of trouble, they approached, unknowing who had gone to his death. Some skaters saw the accident, and when Nicholas heard that it was his father, he made a brave, but futile attempt to save him, in the course of which he ran great danger of losing his own life.

The body was recovered, and five hundred people testified to the popularity of the dead hop-master when he sank into the resting-place of his ancestors at Tenterden.

It was now two years and six months since he had passed.

CHAPTER V

SUPPER AT BUGLE

NATHAN POMFRET was a poor man compared with his brother, yet it happened that Nicholas generally came a-begging. Both were bachelors, and the elder seemed unlikely to change his state. His needs were small, and if he indulged in a little horse-racing at local meetings and shared certain shooting rights with four other guns, these were the only extravagances he allowed himself; but Nicholas found his amusements in London, and did not hesitate to pay for them. He was fond of horses, too, and owned some valuable cobs.

The men were only alike in this: that they entertained profound regard for each other, and while an emotion almost fatherly tinged Nathan's affection, the younger responded in some sort as a son. He patronised the elder, as sons so often do, and Nathan perceived it and minded not at all. He was irrational in his easy attitude, and his mother sometimes pointed this out when she happened to be vexed with Nicholas. Usually, however, Mrs. Crowns committed the same error of judgment herself.

Nicholas was an optimist from experience rather than observation. Finding the world in every respect a satisfactory and pleasant place, he assumed that it made a like appeal to most of his fellow creatures, and professed the easy and comfortable doctrine that things were generally "levelled up" for everybody. He had an argument to explain such inconsistencies as appeared and were thrust under his nose to challenge his senses, or brought to his attention by his more intelligent brother.

He came in to-night and supped with Nathan; and the

old, easy theory was advanced for the hundredth time, when the elder deplored certain conditions in a neighbouring hamlet.

"I'm interested in the folk over there, because your hop-pickers come from there," he said.

"My dear old chap, you never will see it. If you only had my imagination! These people are all gipsies at heart—full of gipsy blood. They've never known anything else but a hand-to-mouth existence. They are used to it for generations, and to-morrow doesn't bother them any more than it bothers a sparrow, or a squirrel, or a sheep. They're improvident by nature."

"They're improvident, because they never get half a chance to make provision. They wouldn't live like sparrows if they could help it."

"They would—it's in the blood. It's the accepted condition in their walk of life, and not felt as a hardship in the least. They know nothing different. I believe they like it: there's a certain sporting element about it. And, after all, it's the only trouble they've got. Think what you escape—to have no responsibility to anything but your own stomach."

"What about wives and children?"

"Entirely their own affair. I never pity any man who whines about his wife and children. There's nothing in the world easier to avoid than a wife and children."

"You'll think differently some day, I expect."

"Very likely, Nat. I keep an open mind."

"An open mind's often the same as an empty one," declared Mr. Pomfret. "You ought to have opinions at your age."

"I have, for that matter; and one is that quite enough is being done for the poor at present, if not too much. They're a feckless crew, and the more you trouble about them, the more you may. The only chaps who ever get anything out of the poor are the humbugs that they send to Parliament and the chaps that run the Trades Unions.

It may pay the Radicals to grovel to the poor, but it doesn't pay me, and I'm not going to do it."

Nathan laughed. They finished their supper, lighted their pipes, then went into the air, and sat on two chairs between the sleeping lions at Bugle door. The night was still and starry and silent. An occasional whisper of air set the willows murmuring by the pond close at hand; then it died away again.

"Proper weather for your hay, Nat. I hope it will hold up till you've saved, then give me a deluge for the hops."

"They're coming on grand."

"Amazingly forward—you'll see nothing like them at this minute in all Kent."

"Your fourth good year running."

"Yes; but I've done my part. If you know as much as I do about 'em, you can often turn a bad year into a good one with pluck and money. Don't leave too much to Nature—that's what I say. Nature's like a woman: she'll often desert you just when you're trusting her most. You can learn a lot about women from the ways of Nature. They're closer to her than us, because they can't rise above her like men can. Nature's got 'em still, but we have escaped."

"You can't talk for five minutes without dragging the women in."

"They're the most interesting things in the world—after hops. And the most troublesome—after hops. That reminds me. I wonder if you could lend me five-and-twenty quid till I begin selling? My hops will be first in as usual. The early 'Prolifics' should go to London first week of August. Then I'll let you have it back—along with the tenner last May."

"All right, Nick, next week. But I must have it back. Hay's thinner than I expected. But not the 'tenner': that was a gift."

"Gift be damned, old chap. You'll take it back, or I'll never ask you for a penny again. Good Lord! Money—between us!"

"That's what I say."

"You've got to take it back. Tuesday—would that do you?"

"Tuesday night."

"Mother's getting on to me about marrying nowadays. But I don't know. Girls are all right, but a girl you can't turn down when you're through with her—I like 'em, but I haven't met one of the marrying sort that I could do with for ever. In fact the marrying sort leave me cold most times."

"There's the race to be thought on. You can't let Crowns stock drop out of Tenterden, nor yet from Hill Crest. It's up to you to think about it."

"And you? You're a Crowns as much as I am."

"In truth, not in law."

"Everybody knows who you are and what you are. The law may be a narrow-minded, wicked fool; but men and women ain't. Who would hang fire because you—? Not any woman worth such a man. But where is such a woman? I've never seen one of 'em good enough for you. But I will say this for girls: if they love you, they rise above every damned thing and cast all to the wind except just you yourself. It don't last in my experience; but for a time it's like that. It would last no doubt with a solid chap like you—cut out for a wife and children."

A man approached and came slowly down a long garden path to where the brothers sat. Not until he had reached them did they recognise Henry Honeysett.

"No rain to-night, Henry," said Nathan.

"No rain to-night, Mr. Pomfret," echoed Henry. "And the thatcher's coming Wednesday."

Nicholas Crowns chaffed the younger man.

"What's this I hear about Nina—Nina Dunk, Henry?"

"How should I know?" asked the head man of Bugle. His tone was calm, but his voice surly.

"Why, you're after her, it's said, and my chap, Johnny Hook, is after her too."

"You always think every man's after a girl," said Pomfret.

"So they ought to be. I'm only warning Henry; he won't have a look in against Johnny."

He had not seen Honeysett's face in the darkness, otherwise, no doubt, the good-tempered Nicholas would have ceased to banter on so delicate a theme. Now Henry spoke.

"Such things are just as much to us as they are to you better-born folk, and if you was a gentleman, you wouldn't speak of them," he answered slowly.

"Come, come, Henry—no offence," said Pomfret; but the other had gone into the house and did not reply.

"Solemn owl," laughed Nicholas. "What a dog's life a man must lead when he can't see a joke!"

"If he wants Nina Dunk and she favours Hook, where's the joke from Henry's point of view?"

"Let him fight Hook for her."

"Well, perhaps he is. They may be having a proper battle; and if they are, you bet they haven't got time to see any jokes about it."

"Johnny knows more about girls than your Henry—more experience."

"Johnny Hook's like you," said Pomfret. "He's built himself on your model—silly creature to think such a man's worth copying."

He chaffed, but with affection in his voice.

"Yes, he copies me," admitted Nicholas, "and I see it and laugh at it. Mother says it's insolent, but I say it's flattery. He dresses like me, and talks like me, and brags like me; and he'd be as lazy as me if he dared. Give me a spot of whisky, Nat, then I'll go home to bed."

They drank, and presently strolled out together as far as the gate of Hill Crest. A light shone overhead in their mother's room, and Nathan looked up at it.

"Poor old dear," he said, "'tis always worse at night she tells me."

“It’s giving, however; she’ll be free of pain in a day or two.”

They parted, and before retiring Nathan strolled down his hayfield. Here, in the gloom, he surprised a man and woman leaning over a gate with their backs turned to him. The man’s arm was round the woman’s waist.

Pomfret recognised Nina and Johnny Hook; but they were only conscious that somebody had walked down the lane behind them.

“Little fool,” thought Nathan; “but no doubt women mostly choose men, like a blackbird picks a cherry—for the outside of ’em.”

CHAPTER VI

THE WITHERDENS

THE town of Tenterden, crowned by its noble tower, ascends above a great vale, and lies on either side of one broad street. The highway is indeed more than a street, for in the midst of it extend tracts of grass, where plane trees break up the line of sight and throw masses of cool shadow on summer days. The houses are pleasant to see, and many of them reveal character and distinction. From a Georgian day they date, and their severe lines and red brick faces are often covered with growing things. Ivy and wistaria, roses and Virginian creeper clothe them, and where they go uncovered, their tiled sides are rich in harmonious tints. The roofs of tile are similarly weathered to beauty and display every pleasant and mellow hue from auburn to red gold.

Many of the shops have white faces barred with perpendicular lines of black, and broken with leaded, diamond panes. The timbers of these aged houses are bent sometimes, as though weight of years began to tell; their roofs also undulate, and the flow and rhythm of such lines touch the buildings into beauty, and contrast with the precision of later houses, whose modern shop-fronts are glazed with plate, and whose lines and faces speak only of yesterday.

Venerable inns mark the way at irregular intervals. "The Wool Pack" peeps into the high street from a smother of green, and its western front lies opposite the churchyard. The little rooms of "The Wool Pack" are full of character, boarded with oak to the low ceilings, and suggestive of the cabins of old sailing ships rather than the chambers of a public house. "The White Lion" is another fine old

dwelling with noble bow windows, and a general aspect of good company and good cheer.

Now, on a Sunday afternoon, Nathan Pomfret and his sister, Jenny Crowns, passed "The White Lion" and turned their attention to a row of pretty little houses which extended beyond it. Jenny pointed to the smallest of all.

"That's where the Witherdens live," she said.

At first sight this miniature dwelling seemed altogether extinguished under a tiled roof. Only one little dormer broke its great sweep, and the narrow house-front below seemed to struggle for existence and threaten to be swamped by the mass above. Black lines were painted along the white face of the cottage, and made a pattern with the two small windows. A long strip of garden, where cherry trees, vegetables, and flowers prospered together in friendly confusion, extended in front. Scarlet pentstemons and budding Mary lilies grew amid a jungle of sweet, old-fashioned briar roses. Then came a wall of French beans and a wedge of cabbage.

Above the biggest cherry tree, a small "Union Jack" on a stick was jerking convulsively, and, as they approached, the brother and sister discovered a girl hid in the mass of the cherry and struggling to climb higher.

"Good gracious, Rosa May, what on earth are you doing up there?" asked Jenny, looking upwards.

"If it isn't!" cried the girl in the tree. Then she dropped the "Union Jack," and the stick on which it was fastened shot down through the cherry tree close to her friend's shoulder.

"Didn't expect you for an hour yet," she said. "I'll come down. I was trying to tie the flag here to frighten the birds, or we shan't have a cherry left."

"I'll do it for you," declared Nathan.

Then Miss Witherden descended, kissed her friend with affection, and was introduced to Mr. Pomfret. The girl was twenty, tall and slight. She had a fair skin, flushed for the moment by her exertion. She looked not more than

sixteen, and all her lines were youthful. Only her very beautiful eyes lent dignity to her young face. They were a changing colour, now doubtfully blue, now grey. A measure of thought homed in them fitfully, then vanished, swiftly to return. Her manner was frank, and she was ingenuous and innocent of coquetry. In repose her mouth was just open, for the bow of the under lip drew down in the midst sufficiently to show a glimpse of the small teeth behind it. Her chin was round and firm, a trifle too small for the eyes and brow above. Her ample hair was of a light flaxen, parted in the midst and done up carelessly and without art. Nor did her Sunday clothes reveal any great attention to dress. Girls do not climb cherry trees in their best gowns if they take any sort of pride in personal adornment.

"Rosa May, you haven't changed an hour," said Jenny, tucking in the border of her friend's bodice, which had escaped from the belt. "Except you're lovelier than ever," she added.

"And so are you," declared Miss Witherden. "Come in. I'd got an idea to put tea out here under the cherry tree, because it's such a beautiful day; but father thought it would be too public, and making a show of ourselves."

"You can't see through a row of French beans anyway," answered Jenny. "Do let's have it out here. I'll help you. Let me introduce Nathan to Mr. Witherden. Then we can leave them and have a talk. I was properly glad to know you were coming to live so near us."

"So was I," answered the other. "Here's father. He's a good bit depressed at coming down in the world, poor dear, but I tell him nobody will think any the worse of him. It's an everyday thing, and we've got enough to live on anyway."

A man approached from the low doorway of his new home. He held his hands by his sides with the palms extended and open, as though pleading for the mercy of the world. His manner was purely apologetic; even his shoulders appeared to indicate the weight of a rebuke.

"How do you do, Miss Crowns," he said. "You see us in very changed circumstances, but through no fault of our own. You will remember when we had the pleasure of entertaining you in our house at Canterbury, things were altogether on a larger scale."

"Don't listen to him," cried Mr. Witherden's daughter. "It's all stuff—as if Jenny cares whether we live in a palace or a beer-barrel, do you, Jenny?"

"You've got one of the prettiest cottages in Tenterden, and a good garden too," said her friend.

"But no domestic," explained Rosa May's father. "We are facing it and we are not pretending. We are now without a domestic—temporarily that is."

"Good riddance," declared Jenny. "This is my brother, Nathan. This is Mr. Witherden, Nat."

Nathan shook hands and viewed the other with a straight glance.

Canute Witherden was five-and-fifty, tall, thin and delicately made. His head was small, with rather long, grey hair; he had large eyes and a small mouth, not concealed by a thin moustache. His beard, carefully cut, was also thin. His hands were delicate, and he wore a signet ring on one, his dead wife's wedding-ring on the little finger of the other. He had lost a hundred a year out of an income of two hundred and fifty, and was very self-conscious and cast down about it. Unable to face his circle at Canterbury after this reverse, Mr. Witherden returned to his native village and proceeded with his precarious business, which was that of agent for an insurance office. A brass plate chronicling the fact shone from the door of his new home. The girls went away together, and Canute Witherden addressed Nathan.

"To find one's income reduced by nearly half is a very staggering experience at five-and-fifty. I have not lost my self-respect, however," he said.

"I'm sure of that. These accidents will overtake a man through no fault of his own."

"There again, I conceal nothing," answered the insurance agent. "It was my fault. The motive—to increase a small income by investments that promised generous returns—was perfectly respectable. But the endeavour, in that it failed, argued great lack of judgment on my part. That, naturally, only makes the situation more distressing. To come down in the world, through no other cause than your own lack of judgment, is exceptionally trying."

"No doubt it is," admitted Pomfret. "Yet a common thing."

"Poignant, I assure you," declared Mr. Witherden. "But even that I face, and I confess it—to you, a stranger—I frankly confess it. I confess it to everybody. Some admire me for not trying to hoodwink myself, or throw the blame on others; some, on the contrary, despise me for being so perfectly frank about it."

"You're right all the same. What's the good of hiding things? I was faced with problems too. No doubt every man is. But the sensible people will respect you all the more for making no mystery. The others don't matter."

"They can take me or leave me. What I say is, 'Let all go, rather than self-respect be lost,' Mr. Crowns."

"My name's Pomfret. Let's see—I've just promised your daughter to go up the cherry tree and make fast that flag. I'll do it now."

The elder was uneasy at once, and became agitated when Nathan took off his coat.

"Please—please—not to-day—not before the passers-by. Had it been in the back garden, or beyond the public eye, I should have said nothing; but here and on a Sunday—no, I beg of you. Perhaps some week-day when you're passing. You see one cannot be too careful in my ambiguous position. As a gentleman I return to the place of my birth. The Witherdens are mostly in the churchyard now; but the name survives, and is redolent of fine tradition. We have advanced the welfare of Tenterden in our time. You don't think the worse of me?"

"Certainly not," declared Nathan, putting on his coat again. "You're quite right."

"I don't like the flag at all for that matter," continued Mr. Witherden. "I think it would be far better to let the birds have the cherries and preserve, as it were, our privacy, but Rosa May finds the cherries on that tree are worth from seven-and-six to ten shillings, and she argues that we ought to save them and sell them to a greengrocer. Of course she is right on the plane of expediency. Harsh things like this meet one at every turn when income fails. But I bear it. The mind becomes deadened after a time, thank God."

"Everybody puts up flags and scarecrows to fright the birds from the cherries at this time of the year," answered Nathan. He began to grow tired of Canute Witherden, and was glad when presently Jenny and the daughter of the house appeared with the tea. Her father expressed fear of publicity, but Rosa May declared that nobody in Tenterden had eyes that could look through the tall rows of scarlet runners. He therefore agreed to tea in the open air.

Canute was clad in a frock-coat and grey trousers, but he returned to the house now, discarded the coat, and put on a jacket of black velvet, braided with crimson cord and turned down with violet silk. Rosa May applauded the change.

"I haven't seen you in your smoking-jacket for ages, father," she said, and he showed mild annoyance that it should be mentioned.

"I have not worn it since——" he answered. "To-day, however——"

During tea their talk ranged over many subjects, but invariably drifted back to the recent discomfiture of Mr. Witherden. Pomfret, however, found Rosa May's cheerfulness more pathetic than her father's egotism. This presently Canute observed, and resented it.

"The young have no sense of perspective," he declared. "They cannot see that for a man to labour forty years,

save his moderate profits throughout that period, and then find them swept away before his eyes, is almost the most tragic experience that falls to the lot of human nature. And if, under these circumstances, we find the sufferer still supporting the banner of self-respect——”

“That reminds me,” said Rosa May. “Mr. Pomfret is going to put up my banner to scare the birds.”

“On a week-day. He has agreed most kindly to do it on some future occasion.”

“I’ll come to-morrow, if you like—or send a man,” answered Nathan. “The sooner the better.”

“You mustn’t—you mustn’t put yourself out,” declared Rosa May. “Why, good gracious! I can do it myself. I should have done it in another minute.”

“You’d have broke your neck in another minute, I do believe,” said Jenny; but Canute had not heard of his daughter’s attempt and was troubled.

“I don’t know, I’m sure, how you can, Rosa May. If I do not permit circumstances to reduce self-respect, why should you? I say nothing against courage and resolution and self-reliance. We have to face life, as Mr. Pomfret so truly said just now; but our situation is hardly such that you are called upon to climb cherry trees, even though we may find it desirable to sell their fruit.”

“Well, I shall have to pick the cherries, so I may as well get used to climbing the tree,” she answered.

“We won’t pursue it. Mr. Pomfret’s cup is empty.”

After tea Nathan offered Mr. Witherden a cigar. This was accepted, and having lighted it the insurance agent showed no further desire to hide behind his scarlet runners. He perambulated his garden, and even stood at the front gate and watched the people for awhile.

“My tobacco, like everything else, has, of course, felt the shock,” he said. “Though not an inordinate smoker, as most reflective men are, I have relied considerably upon it. A cigar was a commonplace with me on a Sunday afternoon when I lived in Canterbury. Not now, however.”

"They're nice for a change. I hope you'll come and smoke one with me at Bugle now and again," said Nathan, and Mr. Witherden bowed.

"I am much obliged to you," he said. "I shall regard it as a great occasional privilege. Fortunately I am a good walker and, in the exercise of my business, am a great deal on foot. I might have started a pony and trap in the old days had I so wished. Now, however, that would be impracticable."

"You may yet. And I hope you'll bring Miss Witherden too. She's fond of farming, she tells me."

"No doubt she will see a good deal of her greatest friend, your sister. A most charming girl, and full of heart and common sense. I once met the mother of Miss Crowns at Canterbury. A remarkably fine and able woman. I hope she is well?"

"She's got gout for the moment, but is getting over it."

Mr. Witherden puffed his cigar and indicated great appreciation.

"I have it in the eyes occasionally—poor man's gout—the true, hereditary gout, which comes of long descent. It is getting rare now. People are staring at me. I'm attracting undue attention, Mr. Pomfret. Let us go back to the house."

"It's your jacket," said Nathan. "Rather showy."

"I was forgetting. Probably it is not a jacket I should wear nowadays. I don it for comfort, not advertisement, I need hardly say. On the whole, it might be better in the cherry tree than upon my person."

"You dare!" said Rosa May, who had returned. "You've got to wear it till it wears out, then I'll make you another."

"Did you make it?" cried Jenny, and Canute's daughter declared that she had.

They praised her skill.

"You must make one for Nicholas," said Jenny. "He'd love one. I'll commission it for a Christmas present."

The bells began to ring for church presently, and Mr. Witherden responded to the summons.

"Where do you worship to-night?" he asked, and Jenny looked doubtfully at her brother.

"Church-going isn't much in our line," said Nathan bluntly. "To-night we're going in to see Mr. Fuggles—at 'The Hydrangeas'—you know."

"I do. I shall value an introduction to him at some future time. His relations and mine knew one another well, no doubt. It was a distinguished ancestor of his who created the famous 'Fuggles' hops."

"It was," said Nathan. "A rare stroke of cleverness, for never a better hop came out of the earth. When all's said and done, it holds its own."

"I've seen him," said Rosa May. "He looks older than time's self."

Jenny made a face, and Nathan spoke.

"Martin Fuggles isn't above sixty-five, if that," he said. "He tells me he was born middle-aged—one of those faces that never could have been what you call young."

They parted then, and presently the brother and sister knocked at the prim door of "The Hydrangeas"—a spotlessly neat Queen Anne abode on the northern side, and toward the eastern extremity of Tenterden. Three storied and square, with a blue door and a great tub of pink hydrangea on each side of it, stood the dwelling. Other adornments it had none, save a door-knocker of bright brass in the grim semblance of a skull between bat's wings—a decoration copied from a churchyard tomb at the fancy of Mr. Fuggles.

He was at home and prepared to see them. The little man resembled the moon, in the sense that he suggested something extinct, burned out, yet bright and polished. A physiognomist would have suspected that here was one who had done all, tasted all, and was now just a heap of ashes, still shining with the reflected light of experience and acquired wisdom. His white skin was drawn tightly over

the bones of his face, and his head was bald. He showed few wrinkles save about his eyes, but the eyes themselves were still bright between their heavy white lids. He spoke with an educated accent and slowly. His dress was old-fashioned, but his movements alert and his mind active. He treated Jenny with great deference, and Nathan with easy friendship.

Mr. Fuggles was always busy. He enjoyed a good income, for which he had never been called to work. He had come through a life of travel and amusement with a reflective and observant mind, and had now ceased to travel and settled in his native town to a late middle-age of intelligent observation. Life still interested him exceedingly, and it was his harmless foible to investigate manners and customs, rights and wrongs, for the advancement of the body politic. Isolated from actual participation in the administration, for he refused to take any sort of office, or identify himself actively with any party, he confined his activity to criticism, and when he fell on an error of judgment, a failure of justice, a social anomaly in the incidence of law or taxation, he aired his discovery and sought to interest those in authority. His enemies said that he was always finding mares' nests; his friends believed that he ought to be more considered; but the world at large and those engaged actively in its affairs, passed him by indifferently. He would have been the first to admit that his efforts were, for the most part, fruitless. He had never married, but now desired that experience, and had fixed on Jenny Crowns as a possible partner. He knew that she was too young for him, yet entertained such an admiration for her common sense that he pursued the quest. It was one of his intellectual interests to win her if he could, and without being sanguine, he felt by no means hopeless. The time had come when he designed to ask for her hand, but he was deliberate in all things, and intended to await a better opportunity than had yet offered. That he would write his proposal was a certainty, and from time to time,

when in the vein, he made a rough draft. From these he preserved the happiest touches; but the finished work was yet incomplete. His hope lay in his ample means and in Jenny's intelligence. He regarded her as not a marrying woman, and liked her the better for that. He believed that she would be happy with him, and knew that he must make an admirable husband for any woman who did not seek gaiety and much entertainment. He was alive to the dangers, but had studied Jenny pretty accurately, and from the result of observation, believed that her self-control and self-respect would prove sufficient to balance the ardent Crowns temperament, which it could not be denied that she possessed.

Mr. Fuggles bade his guests be seated beside an open window from which the sunset might be seen. The talk was at first desultory, then it drifted on to the subject of marriage. He made no attempt to paint it in attractive colours.

"Marriage," said Mr. Fuggles, "is like the profession of the sea. I've known many sailors in my time, and not one over the age of thirty but would have thankfully changed his business, if it had been possible so to do. It's the same with the married state: I'm tolerably certain that nine men out of ten, if they could go back into bachelorhood, would go back, and quite as many women would return to spinsterhood. In the case of the sea, youth blinds the eyes; in the case of matrimony, it's love."

"But we all know thousands of happy married people," said Jenny Crowns.

"No, Jenny, we don't. We all know plenty of self-respecting people, who are horribly afraid of what other people think. We all know scores and scores of foxes who have lost their brushes and declare themselves a lot happier without them; but I'm talking of what's hid in the wedded heart; I'm talking of what would happen if we could get a referendum of married people; and I say that then, nine out of ten—that's not too high—nine out of ten men would

confess, after due consideration, that in their experience the game wasn't worth the candle."

"What about falling in love then?" asked Jenny.

"Well, what about it? Love's natural, and desirable, and seemly. We fall in love, because it's love that makes the world go round; but why should all the complicated horrors of the married state be added, to make a natural process so dangerous and fatal? Man is so built that, though he falls in love readily, he also falls out again quite as often. Why, then, should there be only one gate into the Garden of Love—a gate that only opens one way—like a rat trap? More and more ignore the gate and come and go over the hedge; and, for the moment, I find myself very much in sympathy with them. The State never will cater for those who can't see with its own eyes, and I want the State Church, if I can, to justify its existence for once and teach the State the value of charity in a very vital matter."

"You're after one of your big schemes?" asked Pomfret; "but I wonder all your discouragements haven't made you tired of tackling the leaders of the nation?"

"I've got nothing else to do," confessed Mr. Fuggles frankly. "My life has been most interesting and amusing. I've tried most things and had many flavours on the palate. And now what's left to me is a mind fairly free of illusion, a mind that hopes nothing and expects nothing from human nature, and so doesn't find itself disappointed. Living here unattached I see things, and I see how things might be bettered, and it amuses me to call the attention of those in authority to this and that. The result, however, is nearly always the same. I write to a big man and invite him to consider something that he has the power to alter if he agrees with me. But does the big man answer my letter? Never. All I get is a line from some jack-in-office in the big man's department. Generally it's printed, and merely says that my letter has been received, which I knew before; sometimes it's written; sometimes it even goes to the length

of saying my letter is receiving consideration. It generally ends there."

"Probably the great man never sees your letter at all," suggested Nathan. "No doubt the big departments of the State are fairly snowed up with correspondence; and it rests with some small man to decide whether his chief shall see your letter or no. And the small man, being small, is pretty sure to disagree with your letter if it's got any new ideas in it; because to the small mind, new ideas are generally bad ideas. And so your letter goes into the waste-paper basket, and your time and thought are wasted."

"It generally happens like that, no doubt," admitted Mr. Fuggles; "but it's quite wrong. The big minds ought not to be hedged off from the nation in that way. They ought to be at our service."

"Their time is precious and yours isn't," suggested Jenny.

"No doubt that sums it up, my dear."

"And what's the matter in hand?" asked Pomfret. But Mr. Fuggles would not divulge it.

"Another time you shall hear," he answered. "Not to-day. You'll be specially interested, Nathan—more than that I needn't say for the minute. Come in and have a bit of supper next time business brings you up to Tenterden. Then I'll read you a very fine letter I've written to a very eminent personage."

"Has he answered it yet?" asked Jenny.

"He has not; but that's not to say he won't. The greater—the really greater a man is, the more likely you are to get a reply. Once I wrote to Mr. Lloyd George. He answered himself."

"Was it a success?" asked Jenny.

"It was and it wasn't," declared Mr. Fuggles. "He saw my point of view—and Lord! how few can do that! But it didn't alter his own, which was different. You want to be off? Well, I'll put on my hat and walk a mile with you."

They started presently, and at a cross road Mr. Fuggles bade them "good-night."

"I shall turn here and go back round by the Mill Pool," he said. "The Mill Pool of an evening is a very pleasant and restful place, though, of course, it's got sad memories for your family. It always sets me thinking. I get my best ideas beside it. And mind you come and hear what's in my mind, Nathan. I'm very hopeful something valuable to the State may come of it. It'll interest you specially, as I say."

He left them, and on the homeward way Jenny spoke of him.

"A clever old chap," she said. "And yet how silly even a clever old man can be. Fancy wanting to marry me, Nat!"

"It can't be, and mother oughtn't to think of it, and still less Nicholas. Your future——"

"Yes; it's so jolly easy to plan other people's futures," said Jenny. "I dare say the relations of that poor kid who kept David warm, when he was old, thought it was a fine thing for her. But I'll bet she didn't like it too well. Mr. Fuggles says it's so important to look at a question from other people's point of view. Then why doesn't he look at himself from mine?"

"I believe he knows it's all nonsense really. He didn't think much of marriage, anyway. But you find somebody else and snap your fingers at them," advised Nathan. Then he spoke of the Witherdens.

"Your friend is a proper girl, sure enough," he said—"beautiful and sensible both. Her father's a bit of a cure. Can't say I've ever seen anything quite like him before."

CHAPTER VII

THE THUNDERSTORM

ON the following morning Nathan Pomfret, laughing a little at himself in secret, rose at four o'clock and strolled through the dawn to Tenterden. By five he was in Rosa May's cherry tree, and had carried the flag, which she left stranded on the lower boughs, to the top. In his pocket was twine, and he soon lashed the flag pole firmly so that the bunting of the little "Union Jack" would flutter over the summit of the tree. For the present, however, it did not flutter. No breath of air woke with the morning, and the nightly mists in the valley round about had swiftly dissolved into the fierce heat of day. It was indeed too hot. The cool of night and the freshness of dawn were swallowed up as on a morning in the tropics.

The farmer had proposed to do his act of friendship and depart, rewarded with the satisfaction of knowing that Canute Witherden's daughter would be pleased when she rose and peeped from her dormer window; but now, while he was still in the midst of the cherry tree and the flag was not yet in position, Rosa May's white blind went up; she looked through the open window into the sunshine with blinking eyes, and immediately perceived that somebody was among the cherries. Supposing it could only be an early, predatory boy, she woke up at once and addressed the unseen firmly.

"Climb down and be off, you little rascal!" she cried. "And if ever you come again, I'll tell the policeman. And get down carefully. I'm not going to do you any harm."

A hidden man laughed, and Rosa May waxed indignant. But then she heard Pomfret's voice.

"It's me—putting up your flag. I promised," he said.

"Mr. Pomfret! How wonderful of you! Fancy remembering a little thing like that."

"Why shouldn't I?"

"Men remember big things; they always forget little ones. Don't go—I'll be down in a minute."

Through the leaves of the cherry tree he caught sight of Rosa May's tumbled, bright hair, and her neck, and her nightdress. Then she disappeared, and he had only just made fast the flag and descended when the lock of the front door skreeked, the door opened, and the girl came out.

Her hair was still down and her toilet incomplete. She had not stopped to put on a belt, or tie her shoe-laces. "If I was Nicholas, I'd offer to tie them for her," thought Nathan. But her appearance only made him the more respectful. He admired her hair immensely, and had no guile to wonder if it were indifference or coquetry on Rosa May's part that had left it down. To see a grown woman with her hair down was quite an embarrassing experience for Mr. Pomfret. He felt that he ought to admire, yet suspected any personal remark under the circumstances would be impertinent. An instinct, for which he could have found no word, kept Nathan dumb. He felt Rosa May was unfinished, and therefore unarmed. To compliment a defenceless girl seemed to him only less dreadful than to insult her. She was incomplete in more senses than one, for she looked no more than fifteen in the morning light—an absolute child—and this immaturity, for reasons deep in him and also beyond focussing into words, Nathan regretted. He wished that she had been older, but he did not know why he wished it, or for what cause there woke the desire in him to pile a few years on Rosa May's youthful head.

She overwhelmed him with thanks, and implored him to stop to breakfast and help her prepare it.

"Do!" she said. "It would be such a lark to see father come sailing down, to find you helping me with the hot

water, or something. And then he would explain why we breakfast in the kitchen, though, of course, it harrows all his finer feelings and spoils his appetite—poor dear. But we're going to have a servant, after all."

Mr. Pomfret, however, denied himself this entertainment.

"I'd dearly like to help you, but not to fluster your father," he said. "I'm going back to look after my hay now, and if you go out after noon, take an umbrella. There's going to be a thunderstorm."

Rosa May gazed incredulously at the blue sky.

"Never!" she cried.

"I'll bet you your cherries there is. And don't think I wouldn't like to come to breakfast. I would. Perhaps some day, if you ask me again, I will. And you're coming to Bugle to see me, mind."

He nodded, and she thanked him very warmly for his good offices. At the gate he turned, thinking that she would have disappeared, but she still stood at the door and waved her hand to him.

Rosa May felt a genuine flow of friendship for Nathan, and admired him too; while he strode off homeward well pleased, yet uneasy, his mind excited and content, though streaked with a little sadness. He wondered why this shadow haunted it and explained it presently. "It's her hair," he thought. "I wouldn't have missed seeing it, and yet—and yet to see a beautiful thing and know you'll never see it again—to a stupid sort of mind like mine—that makes you discontented. She is fine. She don't care a button. She don't care much about her own buttons, for that matter. With most girls you feel their clothes are part of 'em—often the best part. But not with her. She's so wonderful natural that clothes would never kill her. She's the sort that sticks 'em on, not because she wants to, but because she's got to."

He painted for himself a very complimentary picture of Rosa May's fearless mind, and then dismissed her from his own as he entered his hay-field and remained there. Men

had been working for an hour, and Pomfret stopped Eli Samson, who was sitting behind two horses on the grass mower. The old man expected it and alighted.

"You're going to tell me there's thunder coming," he said; "and so there is; and a proper dollop of rain along with it. This heat's bringing the electricity up out of the ground, so I can feel it rise up through my feet to my head."

Henry Honeysett, seeing Pomfret, also approached. Elsewhere Miss Dunk, her niece, Nina, and the Daynes sisters were hay-making, while Johnny Hook, who worked at Bugle till the hay should be saved, was sharpening a blade for the mower.

"We'll cut no more till we see," said Nathan; "I reckon we'll have a tidy thunder rain presently. A storm's afoot for certain, but the rain may miss us. Anyway you can knock off cutting, Eli. We'll put all the time into saving for the minute. No dew last night. And what you've cut this morning you can throw into cocks."

The work went on, and an hour later breakfast was taken in the shade of a growing rick. The heat had now increased, and Mrs. Ledger, who descended from Bugle with some great cloam jugs of tea, protested.

"My head always tells me," she declared. "It have been panging all night—properly bursting with electric fluid. Always like that, I was. If there's lightning offering in the air, it finds me hours and hours before the storm bursts. My father was the same."

These phenomena interested Mr. Samson and amused the younger people.

"Same with me," said the old hop-dryer. "At this moment my head's aching as if yesterday had been a Bank Holiday instead of the Lord's. And if you're that subject to the fluid, Jane Ledger, you ought to take extra good care of yourself when lightning's on the wing, for be sure it will search you out if it gets the chance."

"I know it only too well," she answered. "Such signs

ain't sent for nothing. There's only one place you'll find me in when there's a thunderstorm, and that's the cellar."

"A proper old lightning-conductor, I'm sure," said Johnny Hook.

Miss Dunk supported Jane.

"I don't feel it myself," she declared, "but brother William does. This spell of heat's fairly knocking him. He's out on the shady side of the house, gasping like a fish and praying for the rain to cool the air."

All hands were soon at work again getting hay ready for the rick. On the top of it stood Johnny Hook and Honeysett, and to them came a laden wain bringing loads from distant parts of the great field. Nathan joined the hay-makers and worked with his eye on the sky; Mr. Samson went up to Bugle with the horses from the machine mower, and presently returned with another big tarpaulin folded and carried over one of the horse's backs. Still the sky held fair, and as the sun climbed to the zenith the heat became tremendous. Mrs. Ledger brought cider, and presently Nicholas Crowns came down from Hill Crest. It was to him the laziest moment in the year; all had been done that wit of man could do for the hops, and there remained nothing but to hope for rain, and watch the burr swell to maturity.

He took off his coat and waistcoat, collar and tie, and laid them by the rick. Then he tightened his belt, picked up a hay-fork, and set to work beside his brother.

"Is it coming?" he asked.

"No sign yet, but I think so. We're just piling the new cut. The rest's safe under the tarpaulins. It may not be here till nightfall."

"Sorry for you, glad for myself," declared Nicholas; "I'll warrant a good few hop-growers are looking out. There's money for us in heavy rain just now."

"That's all right then," declared Nathan. "We're on velvet whatever comes along, for your good's mine, and my good's yours."

At noon, when the party ate their dinner and took their rest, the great change began. The cloudless blue began to pale and fade a little; the narrow but deep shadows thrown by the mid-day sun slowly lost their clean outlines. The wind—a breeze hardly perceptible—was from the east, but this sickly pallor over the sky came up out of the north-west, and gradually thickened on the far horizon until it took the shape of a low grey bank above the edge of the earth. Visible clouds with a lurid edge then gradually ascended, and—very faintly from far away—there came to the watchers a murmur, dull and monotonous. It persisted, with little interval between the reverberations, and grew louder. At the first whisper, Mrs. Ledger made off up the field as fast as she could trudge; but the storm was still remote and might miss Tenterden and the vale by miles. The folk ate and drank and marked the signs and wonders of the sky. Light thickened swiftly now, and the great clouds began to tower to north and west. Two storms were lifting, and the distant thunder, in strophe and antistrophe, shouted from one to the other.

“They’ll meet at Hill Crest by the look of it,” said Nicholas. “I’d best go up and see all’s snug. We can’t miss them now, thank goodness. Come on, Hook.”

Hill Crest had been struck twice in living memory, for its high perch made it a storm centre. After the second blow, which had shattered the cone of an oast, a lightning conductor was fixed to the great central chimney stack, and Bugle had been similarly protected.

Now day slowly died save to seaward. Thus light came from an unnatural quarter, and increased the strangeness of the scene. The darkness gathered until the north was night-black; the stillness became intense between the distant thunderclaps. There entered a curious quality into the tones of voices, and laughter seemed to jar.

“It’s going to be the biggest thing we’ve had for many a year,” said Nicholas Crowns. Then he hastened off with his man, and Miss Dunk, who lived half a mile away with

her brother and niece in a woodside cot, also prepared to depart.

"William's liked to be choked," she said. "We'll be gone, for there's no more work in the hay to-day."

Nina picked up their bag and the two went off. A tarpaulin was thrown over the mowing machine, and the haymakers began to trail up the hill to Bugle. Here and there cattle were galloping in the meadows, and rooks were homing, as though evening had come. Through southern Kent thousands of eyes watched the sky, thousands of ears hearkened to the thunder, thousands of hearts hoped that the thunder rain might not miss their hops.

But there was no fear that Hill Crest would escape the storm centre. It seemed to beckon the darkness and make a tryst for the battalions of the sky. Presently a herald flash, repeated thrice, ran down a precipice of cloud. It seemed to cleave a channel and burst the fountains of the rain. The party, still some hundreds of yards from Bugle, began to run, and Milly and Susan Daynes, outdistancing the rest, soon reached the shelter of a byre. But it was covered with corrugated iron, and Eli Samson, when he arrived panting, bade them come out and enter another, whose roof was thatch. From the mouth of this they watched the summer world drown.

Nathan Pomfret had called to Honeysett, and they set off together over the flat pasture that spread north of the farm. It held two hundred sheep, and the flock, that had grazed indifferent until now, began to run in crowds and strings to the trees, where greatest danger lay. Honeysett whistled to an old English sheep-dog, and they proceeded to harry the sheep into the open.

"It was under these elms I lost thirty at a stroke two years since," explained Pomfret as they ran. "I don't want that to happen again."

It had grown nearly as dark as night, and the first heavy drops of rain fell singly. Then they increased, and the thunder roared and jolted and crashed without ceasing.

Diamond-bright lightnings fell in jagged bunches and ribbons knotted and twined together: they seemed to leap upward out of the earth as well as fall upon it. The rain came then, in a sudden sheet of grey drawn over the purple behind it. Its moan had long been heard, like a great sigh through the brief silences; but now it cried aloud, with a steady hissing and lashing that only the thunder drowned. With forked tongues the lightning seemed to tear the solid canopy of descending waters; while a fierce, sudden wind leapt up and swept the rain in torrents before it. It was a noble storm, and persisted long. The dusty roads were turned into rivers; each little tarn grew full again to the brim; over the sloping fields, baked brick-dry by long days of sunshine, the water raced in foaming floods.

A sense of suffocation came to some who stood and watched. The surcharged air weighed upon the lungs, and men sweated under it and took long breaths, until slowly it seemed to grow thin and sweet again, as the armies of the storm under their bannerets of lightning tramped seaward. Light increased upon the north, and fleeting blue broke the silver here and there. A lark ventured aloft and sang a tiny treble to the thunder. Honeysett and Pomfret and the sheep-dog returned all dripping to the farm. Men crept out from their hiding places, to sniff strange scents liberated from the earth. The sponge-coloured fallows had changed colour and were brown. Already meadow, covert, hedgerow were greener, and the cattle grazed again.

For hours it rained, while the storm swept round about and threatened to return; then slowly it sank and was shattered, and a ray of westering sunshine set the world on a twinkle.

In the valley, above the legions of the Hill Crest hops, there rose a grateful steam at the touch of the setting sun, and glitter of a million raindrops flashed like jewels upon the leaves.

Nicholas and Jenny Crowns walked in the gardens, and he was boyish in his delight.

"That rain is a hundred pounds in my pocket," he declared.

"But what about Nat?" she asked.

"He's all right. The weather hasn't broke. He'll be cutting again to-morrow. Come and look at the 'Bramblings.' This'll be a godsend to them. My usual luck. They didn't have a drop t'other side of the North Downs, so Swadling tells me."

CHAPTER VIII

A VISIT FROM ROSA MAY

AMONG the cherished traditions of our middle class is the Sunday breakfast sausage. Many a thing equally fine has vanished before the march of progress, but the Sunday sirloin at mid-day dinner and the sausage for breakfast thus far defy time and continue to impose their stodgy charms upon the British Sabbath. Mrs. Crowns was getting better, and in a few days might have found her feet strong enough again to sustain her twelve stone of womanhood, when fatal weakness before the Sunday sausage threw her back and she paid for her unwisdom with a slight relapse.

She admitted it frankly, for she was ever frank.

"I can't resist them, and never could, more shame to me," she said to Jenny. "I argued with myself about it, and very nearly conquered; then Nicholas must go and bring them up to my bed and put them under my nose; and I thought I was through with the attack, and let my appetite overcome my reason. Now I shall have three more days of it, and nobody to thank but myself."

"He oughtn't to have brought them up: I told him not," answered Jenny. "But he said you were on the mend, and knew you loved them."

Mrs. Crowns shook her head.

"He's weak—weaker than us," she declared. "I tremble for him still."

"There's always Nathan to keep him right, however."

"And well he does it; but Nat's bewitched by Nicholas in a sort of way. He's got an absurd notion that Nick's worth two of himself. He can't see Nick's mistakes.

Why, he stands up for Nick against me—just like his father used to !”

“ Nick’s all right. He likes his bit of fun, but he’s not wicked. I’m sure we’re all as good as gold really; but if you’re prosperous, and healthy, and young enough to enjoy everything that comes along, you can’t keep looking on ahead for the rainy day and spoiling a good time now, just to escape a bad time a hundred years hence. That’s what Rosa May says.”

“ There’s real dangers as well as fancied, however,” argued Mrs. Crowns. “ Nick’s so fond of being admired. It throws him open to trouble, because cunning men—and most men are cunning after forty—see his weak spot and know, if they play on it, they’ll catch him.”

“ Why should anybody want to catch him ?”

“ There’s always people want to catch a well-to-do, easy, rollicking chap like Nicholas. Women as well as men for that matter. He spends a deal too much money on the women as it is. And so careless ! I was tidying over his drawers last month and——”

“ That photograph—you showed it to me. We must fix him up with a wife.”

“ But she’s got to be the right one. And he’s not likely to choose the right one at present,” said Mrs. Crowns. “ No, I’d rather he didn’t marry yet awhile. I know the sort he’d choose to-day. It’s the sort I hope he’ll hate ten years hence. And, be it as it will, he won’t ask me, or you, to help him find her—more than he’ll ask the man in the moon.”

“ I wonder what he’ll think of Rosa May ?”

“ Nothing, if her strong point is common sense, as you say.”

“ She’s wonderfully pretty too.”

Jenny looked up at the kitchen clock.

“ I’m going down to meet her and bring her up through the gardens. Will you have your dinner with us, or would you rather take it in the other room ?”

"No, no, I'm up for anything. You didn't forget the tapioca pudding? That's all I shall allow myself."

Nicholas came in from his orchard with some fruit.

"Don't you look at it, my old dear," he said; "the first ripe 'white-hearts.' I must start picking in a week. There's a heavy cherry crop this year, and Nat's damsons are promising a ton."

"How's his medlars?" asked Mrs. Crowns.

"The tree's full. He keeps those for you."

"Lucky nobody likes them but you, mother," said Jenny. Then she bade Nicholas join her and come to meet Rosa May.

"I thought it was to-morrow," he answered. "I'll just change my coat and shave, then I'll be along."

"You vain thing! But Rosa May won't look at you. You're not her sort."

"You never know," replied Nicholas with a grin, and went off to make himself smart.

Presently they walked to meet Miss Witherden, who was to dine with her friend. The weather had not broken, and now, a week after the storm, the days of mid-July were full of sunshine, and the short nights warm and starry. Nathan's hay, though not a great crop, had saved well.

In the hops they passed Rupert Swadling—a man of one idea and most concentrated character. He was a sandy-haired, middle-aged bachelor, with a somewhat forlorn and wistful cast of countenance. His affections, ardours and interests had been entirely absorbed by the hop. He appeared indifferent to the welfare or the sufferings of beast or man, but instantly responded to any threat of ill or smile of promise in the hop gardens. Even a solitary bine torn from a pole, destroyed by accident, and hanging lifeless from its support, would depress him. He haunted the manure heaps like a dor-beetle, and some people said he lived in them—a suspicion to which his raiment lent colour—but this was not true: Mr. Swadling had an attic under the roof of Hill Crest. Much, however, he loved to pile the

farmyard stuff over the hills of the hops and bury it around the plants; for food and more food was his panacea for all trouble. On Sunday he might be seen in a different set of rags reserved for that day. He would then spend his time about the gardens, sitting in the hedge or on a cluster of poles, or standing like a scarecrow in one of the alleys, his hands in his pockets, his pipe in his mouth, beaming at the hops far more genially than ever he did upon his fellow-creatures. They were his friends: he understood them, and spent his life in their service.

Mr. Swadling was on his way to the creosote tank to move fifty poles that had stood therein a week; but when his master surprised him, he was gazing at the harvest that swelled upon the bine and regarding three acres of the "Fuggles" as though their splendour had mesmerized him.

Nicholas reproved Mr. Swadling, not for staying to admire, but for his unkempt personal appearance.

"What a dirty old devil you are, Rupert," he said; "surely to goodness you can scrap those rags before next picking and start something a bit more decent? It's a bad advertisement for Hill Crest."

Swadling smiled.

"That's the advertisement for Hill Crest," he said, pointing to the smiling ranks of the "Fuggles." "Never did I see nothing finer. The burr's going to be so big as hot-house grapes afore it's done growing."

"If I give you a suit of old clothes, will you wear 'em?" asked Nicholas.

"On Sundays I would do so. And that would let out my Sundays for every day," answered the labourer indifferently.

"Your Sundays aren't an atom better than what you've got on, Rupert," declared Jenny, but he would not allow this.

"That's all you know, miss," he said. "If you was to look at 'em close——"

"I wouldn't look at them close for anything," she

answered. "I'll find some clothes—and a cap. Then you can fling that awful billycock away."

"I'm always wishful to please," said Rupert. "You'll bear me out I'm always wishful to please, where it can be done; but I never did set any store on clothes. They're a great waste of money. Not but what they make very fine dressing for the hops, and many a cast-off garment's doing better work in the hop hills than covering a worthless human."

"Well, you dig your clothes in then and have done with them," advised Nicholas, "and those shameful boots too."

But here Mr. Swadling was firm.

"The boots are good for years yet," he answered. "They ain't two year old from the shop."

The creosote tank was a metal vat sunk into the earth. Here, where the air was impregnated with a clean, tarry smell, Nicholas and his sister left Rupert, and, proceeding to the lane beyond, met another acquaintance, and walked beside her on the way to Tenterden. Sarah Dunk was perturbed, and life ran awry in her family. But, though concerned, she kept a resolute courage and a placid outlook, according to her rule of life and habit of mind.

"You'll be sorry to hear, miss, that brother William has gone a lot worse during the night," she said. "Nina's along with him, for it is his bent to like her better than me as his mind fails. He wouldn't let her from his sight, so I'm going for the doctor."

"He can't do anything, Sarah," declared Nicholas; "you ought never to have taken that house in the wood. A silly place to live in for anybody but a gamekeeper."

"As to that," she said, "the house was William's choice. When he retired from his little business, he was so properly fed up with his fellow-creatures that he said it would be a fair godsend to end his life with trees."

"It's shortened his life, I believe," said Jenny; "suddenly to leave a busy place like Tenterden and go and live in a wood—it must have been too much of a shock for his nerves."

"No," returned Miss Dunk. "Trees wouldn't kill off William. He always neighboured with 'em all his life and held to it they were pleasant and restful companions. In my opinion it was giving up work that hastened his end. There's been a good few little things the matter with him for years; but while he was busy, he hadn't time to bother about 'em. Now they take hold of his thoughts. He's fading away, that's how 'tis with him. He's lost the will to live, and if you do that, you're soon a goner."

"It's an insult to life," declared Nicholas. "To say you don't want to go on living is an insult to life. I'll drop in next time I'm passing and try and shake him up."

They strolled beside Miss Dunk on the road to Tenterden, and presently she spoke again.

"I'm sure you won't think the worse of me," she said. "But there's another thing a good deal on my mind. And that's your man, John Hook. It's my duty to speak, and so I do. I'm an old woman, and haven't lived in the world near seventy years without getting to know a bit about men. And in my humble judgment, John Hook is rubbish. That's nothing out of the common for a young man to be, and I shouldn't have let it trouble me but for the fact that he's after my niece, Nina. When brother William goes, Nina is the only relation left to me, and I'm very fond of Nina, and exceedingly wishful to see her provided for and safe with a good husband. Well, there is such a man at the door, and that's Henry Honeysett up to Bugle. He's all for Nina, and being, as I think, a very steadfast, good, Christian sort of man, without vice and not short of sense, I could hope nothing better for Nina than him."

"He'd be a splendid husband for her," said Jenny, "but you can't arrange these things for people."

"You can help them," argued Sarah Dunk. "It isn't as if Nina had any feeling against Henry: she has not; and if she was left alone, she'd very likely come round to his way of thinking, and live to thank her stars she'd done so. But Hook's after her, and he's got a cleverer tongue than

Henry, and a more dashing way with him, and spends his money on his stupid back. Never a maiden prinked herself up more than he does—instead of putting his cash in the savings bank. And why I name it at all is just for this reason, that an educated, thinking man, as you ought to be, must know Honeysett's more like to be a good husband than a vain, noisy piece like Hook. And so I ask you to help me."

"What can I do?" asked Nicholas.

"Keep a tighter hand on Hook to begin with."

"Impossible, Sarah. It's a free country. And, for one thing, I don't agree with you about Hook. He's a very smart man, and he'd make just as good a husband for your niece as Honeysett would—very likely a better. For Henry's as solemn as an owl, and he'd be a death's-head in a house for any lively, pretty girl like Nina; but Hook has got a bit of fun and spirit in him."

"If they both love Nina, she must choose between them, Sarah," added Jenny. "You can't dictate. It's for Henry to try and cut Johnny out. He ought to be equal to it—especially with you to help him."

Miss Dunk was unmoved.

"I see you don't agree with me about your man," she said to Nicholas. "Well, it's a free country, as you say. But you won't think none the worse of me for naming it, I'm sure."

"Of course not, Sarah, and I hope Honeysett will cut out Hook with all my heart—since you wish it," said Nicholas. "Leave it at that. Who's this?"

A girl had appeared in the road before them.

"Rosa May, of course," cried Jenny, and a moment later Nicholas was introduced. The three then turned together, and Miss Dunk proceeded alone.

Rosa May was clad in a pretty summer gown, and her hat was trimmed with a big bunch of artificial sweet peas. She looked very dainty, and was in the best of spirits. First they admired the hops.

"That's my work," said Nicholas. "D'you understand hops?"

"Not in the least," declared Rosa May, "but they're lovely. And Mrs. Daynes, at the sweet shop—you know—tells me her girls always make four pounds a year each when the picking begins. That's the most interesting thing about them, from a business point of view."

"Come and pick yourself," suggested Nicholas. "Plenty of our friends do—just for the fun of it. We have a regular picnic, don't we, Jenny?"

"Yes, in fine weather," she answered. "But Rosa May's father would never let her. He'd think it awful, wouldn't he, Rosa?"

"I believe he would," she said. "But I can get round him. Or if I can't, Mr. Pomfret would. He thinks a great deal of Mr. Pomfret already."

"I'll come and see him," promised Nicholas; "and you must join the pickers. Jenny and you shall have a bin to yourselves, and I'll wait on you and see you have a good time and plenty of heavy, clean hops. You'll love it. And you shan't do a stroke more than you want to."

The impressionable young man was attracted, and Jenny saw that he was.

"If all the pretty girls in Kent came to offer for the picking, Nick would take them on," she said. "You've only got to be a pretty girl to have him at your mercy."

Rosa May laughed and glanced at the farmer. She perceived that he was handsome, and also observed that he was excitable. For excitable men she had always entertained mild contempt. It seemed unmasculine in her judgment to show feeling at slight provocation.

They left the gardens and began to ascend the great meadow that sloped aloft. From the green sea of the hops they climbed, and Rosa May praised Hill Crest, massed with its oasts and dark fir trees on the crown of the hill. The high-pitched roof shone with rich colours, and a dozen snowy fantails strutting upon it made contrast with the

ruddy and golden lichened tiles. Stacks of hop poles clustered round about, and a fine shippon, also covered with red tiles, opened its wide and shadowy mouth beside the farmhouse gate.

"Come round to the front and see my own little garden before we go in," said Jenny.

But in truth, Jenny's garden was not a garden at all. A copse ran north from Hill Crest, and in the midst was a water-hole surrounded by iron wire to keep out the rabbits. Heavy oaks met overhead and a few garden flowers, looking frightened and out of place, struggled on the banks. A rustic seat had been erected here, and in the pond a white water-lily struggled to perfect her beauty, though she was sadly afflicted by the lack of sunshine and the attention of the water voles.

"What can I do to make it a bigger success?" asked Jenny. "Of course it's all right on a day like this, but at other times it's mournful. And Nick won't cut down a few trees and let me have light."

"It's not the place for a garden," declared Rosa May. "It's just a beautiful, wild spot that ought to be left alone and not messed with. I'd give it up, Jenny, and make a garden somewhere else."

Her brother agreed, jested about Jenny's horticulture, and then went into the orchards to shoot thrushes and rid the cherry trees of the birds, while Rosa May was introduced to Mrs. Crowns.

Georgina made her welcome, and they talked about Mr. Witherden and his new home.

"He'll be known and respected there," said Mrs. Crowns.

The elder regarded Jenny's visitor with a pensive interest that presently deepened, for Miss Witherden never set up barriers between herself and any human being. A certain distinguished quality of mind belonged to her. She was trustful, and disposed to give all fellow-creatures credit for her own frankness. Thus she disarmed some doubtful natures, for trustfulness is a boon as well as a danger. It

throws a possessor open to attack from the base, but it may make friends among those whose friendship is worth having. Rosa May had a gift of humour, too, which raised her in the esteem of Mrs. Crowns; for Georgina, from experience, knew that a girl with humour has generally common sense as an adornment also. The visitor amused her, and she marked that no sub-acid flavour sharpened her fun. Rosa May had found some of her new acquaintances at Tenterden diverting; but she spoke of none unkindly and acknowledged with gratitude the offers of friendship that she and her father had already received.

Interest dawned in Mrs. Crowns. Then she laughed at herself secretly for feeling it, and put it away from her.

"For certain Nick will hate the maiden—'tis always so," she thought, while she gazed from eyes weary with pain at Jenny's friend.

But she found herself mistaken, and the suspicion of experience for once miscarried. Whatever Nicholas might think of Rosa May, his attitude toward the girl was entirely flattering to her. Nor could it wholly be set down to his natural man, which ever sought to shine before a good-looking woman.

They dined presently and the host was attentive. More than mere courtesy and pleasure marked Nicholas. To his mother's eye he displayed an unusual interest and admiration. She discounted it liberally on account of Rosa May's friendly manners and obvious charms; but even then a margin existed. Nicholas clearly enjoyed the company of the guest, and when their meal was ended, he did not take his departure, but delayed, smoked a cigar, and evinced concern for the future entertainment of Rosa May.

Jenny strove to catch her mother's eye once or twice, but failed, though Mrs. Crowns was aware of the attempt. None could be more inscrutable than she when it pleased her. As for Rosa May, unconscious that Jenny's brother was exhibiting any unusual gallantry, she welcomed his genial presence with an open mind, laughed at his jokes,

and presently, when he had departed, praised him without reserve.

"How jolly to have a brother like that," she said.

"He's quite different from Nathan, isn't he?"

"Quite—except they both seem to see the funny side of life and not take themselves too seriously."

"No Crowns ever does," said the mother of the men.

"And it's doubtful wisdom on their part in a world that's prone to judge you by your own valuation. All the same, though he wouldn't show it to you, Nicholas is on very good terms with himself."

Rosa May nodded.

"I expect he is," she said. "He's the sort that unbend a bit with girls. They feel we are on a different plane. I never mind it, but some girls hate it nowadays. I've met them. They think if a man gives up his seat in an omnibus for them he's insulting them, and only meaning that he's stronger than them."

"That's the result of higher education," declared Mrs. Crowns. "The more learning a girl gets, the less use she's got for men. It's learning has made the women turn against men—and the men fight shy of the women too for that matter. It cuts both ways. Few clever men ever make love to a woman that's cleverer than they are."

"The instinct of self-preservation, I expect," said Rosa May. "I don't blame them. I hate a woman full of man's cleverness, just as I should hate a man full of woman's cleverness. It's woman's cleverness that makes woman's power, not trying to fill herself up with man's cleverness."

"There's great changes coming," replied Mrs. Crowns.

"Women are doing men's work everywhere now," said Jenny, whereon her mother revealed a glimpse of intuition.

"The point is," she said, "that what women can do as well as men, isn't men's work. The burden of work's shifting. Till now it was thought only men could do a lot that women have shown they can do just as well. Women, along of education, have reached the point when

they can be clerks and do clerks' work as well as men. And what does that mean? That necessary work of that sort will soon be done by women, and men will have to turn to work they can do, and women can't. And the thing will be for them to find it. Lord knows where they will. If they're content to rough it in the market with women, they'll go down, because women can do their work cheaper than they can. So they've got to show that if the women of this generation have gone one better than the last, the men of this generation have got to go one better than the last. If I was a man, I'd never rest content to do what a woman could do as well. It's up to men now to convince the shouting women that they are the stronger and wiser creatures. If they can't, then let 'em throw up the sponge and grant a woman's as good as a man every time. But while they squabble, and shut up the women, and let 'em out again, and treat 'em like naughty school-children, and confess themselves powerless before them, of course the women will stick to it they're as good as the men—and stronger and wiser and better, for that matter. It's for the men to prove they're wrong."

"And the men can't seemingly," said Jenny. "You see men and women serving at the same counter everywhere."

"And the men ought to blush to do it," answered her mother. "I'd as soon see a man sewing, or making women's silly clothes, as I would see him walking a shop, or handing out tea and sugar, or silver and gold, as the case might be. Let men find work women can't do."

"The thing is to find such work for educated men," urged Rosa May. "Manual work, of course, they do better, and the work of soldiers and sailors and builders and such-like; but when it comes to indoor work and brain work, what is there a woman isn't just as good for as a man? And if women rose to ruling, how can you say they wouldn't rule as well as men?"

"For lots of reasons," answered Mrs. Crowns; "but the

only reason that matters is because they are women. It's a far-reaching thing to be a woman, and though many females ain't women, as men understand the word, there'll never be enough of that neuter sort to rule the roost, or get men to share man's power with them. I'll grant women have got a mighty lot of power over men, and always have had; but the neuters have not, and every man at the bottom of his heart, whether he's a suffragist man or not, will tell you the neuters are a bore and a nuisance. He can't tell 'em in plain language they're not women, and don't count anyway, but that's what he'd like to do."

"They've got justice on their side, however," argued Rosa May.

"They have," admitted Mrs. Crowns, "and that makes them all the more of a nuisance, because honest men know it, and have to act accordingly, while all the time, at the back of their minds, they also know a line's got to be drawn, justice or no justice. And where has it got to be drawn, and who's brave enough to draw it? Nobody wants to be rude to the women, but I'm always surprised to think how civil men are to them, take men all round. Look at our clothes alone. Think of the thing called fashion, and what we do and waste and suffer for it. No, as a sex we're a lot weaker-minded as well as weaker-bodied than men, and presently they'll have to prove the first as, of course, they've always proved the second. If they can't—so much the worse for them; but they will. They'll do it reluctantly, but they'll do it. If women go on till they kill the natural, decent instinct of men—the chivalrous way Miss Witherden talks about—then they'll be up against something hid in men they don't know about yet; and find their calculations as to the future mistaken."

After these great prophecies they left the sibyl and did not return until tea was ready. Then Nicholas reappeared, and presently Nathan came over from Bugle. He knew that Rosa May was visiting Jenny, and had an idea that he might perhaps walk back to Tenterden with her in the

evening. But he found himself forestalled. Nick presently announced that he was bound for the township on the hill, and when Rosa May feared that she must start homeward, he offered to escort her. Whereupon his brother kept silent. When they were gone Jenny related the incidents of the day.

"And I do believe Nick's interested in her," she said. "I never remember him spreading himself for a girl like he has to-day. And mother liked her—didn't you, mother?"

"I did. She's comely and bright. She'll never let her cleverness smother her, like a lot of girls nowadays. She's light-hearted."

"And whole-hearted," declared Jenny. "She's never met a man she could care about."

"What do you think of her, Nat?" asked Georgina.

"Can't say I've seen enough of her to speak," he answered. "But I say ditto to you; she's got a lot of sense and no use for humbug and showing off."

"Every woman's got use for humbug," declared Mrs. Crowns; "but Jenny's friend hasn't found any use for it yet, I believe. A very frank creature."

"And pretty to look at—you must grant that, Nat."

"She's more than pretty, Jenny; she's beautiful," he declared.

"There'll be a lot after her, no doubt," said his mother. "I hope she'll choose well, for she deserves a good man if I'm any judge of character."

"Can you see her married to Nicholas?" asked Jenny. But Mrs. Crowns did not answer.

CHAPTER IX

THE OPINIONS OF CANUTE WITHERDEN

NATHAN POMFRET, rising early, picked a great bunch of flowers in Bugle garden. The bouquet he gathered was absurdly large, but its size pleased him. Here were roses and goats' rue and a Mary lily, with tufts of silvery French lavender and sweet peas. From a little Tuscan rose also he plucked some sprays, because their scent commended them. The hour was just after dawn, and only Nathan and the swallows were waking. The birds kept up a ceaseless twittering, and darted through the clear grey morning, catching food for their young in the clay nests under Bugle's eaves.

The man set out for Tenterden. Here and there guns were firing in the cherry orchards, but he met none known to him, until reaching his destination and getting rid of his fragrant burden.

He had time upon the way to ask himself what he was about; but his mind proved to be impatient under the question and declined to consider it. Something had certainly happened to awake concern, yet when he examined this interest, he found his instinct inclining him to let the matter alone and not probe it. Usually disposed to have motive for action clear, naturally reluctant to proceed upon any road until the goal was determined, he found himself now, much to his surprise, in no mood to follow his general rule. Reason clashed with impulse and, for the moment, impulse won. Even in this victory of half of his mind over the other half, Nathan told himself that it was all nonsense and weakness. He knew perfectly well that there existed no real mystery, and that five minutes'

reflection would strip the situation bare; but on this cool, grey summer morning, with pleasure in store, he resolutely put away from him any analysis of self and reconciled his conscience by telling it that future events must furnish the necessary explanation without any effort on his part.

To-day promised to be agreeable, but the instinct that decided him to leave till nightfall any consideration of the questions in his mind, was not powerful enough to prevent one duty. Reason insisted that powder was to be mixed with the jam: he intended to say certain things to Canute Witherden, and he had a faint suspicion that they might prove unpalatable and even affect injuriously the spirit of the hour.

He had been invited to lunch with the Witherdens at half past twelve o'clock; but it was now but half past six. Nevertheless, on arriving at their cottage, he entered the gate and went up to the door. He cast one glance at the dormer window in the roof, and some sense of relief filled his soul to note that Rosa May had not yet stirred. He placed his giant bouquet on the doorstep and departed as gently as he could. Then he went down Tenterden High Street, struck into the country, and reached a farm in the direction of Romney Marshes, where he had promised to call and take breakfast. His visit concerned the purchase of calves, and that matter settled, Pomfret strolled back to Tenterden and found himself still an hour ahead of his appointment.

He dropped in at the "Woolpack," drank, smoked, spent half an hour in chat, and proceeded. There was a little shop by the way, where toys and sweetmeats were sold. Outside it stood half a dozen children regarding the dainties displayed; inside was twilight, a mixture of heavy, stiocky odours and the buzz of flies. Nathan bent his head, for the door was low, and entered. A row of wooden horses opposed him, and he nearly fell over a child or two. Overhead fly papers numbered their victims by thousands; on the counter were bottles full of all manner of sweets, while

reserves of chocolate loaded the shelves behind. An old woman was serving. She was tall, but bent, and her hair shone very white under a black cap.

"Mr. Pomfret! Well, I never."

She was pleased to see the customer.

"Talk a bit, there's a dear man. I was very near coming over to Bugle last week, but I'm no walker. How are you faring, and how's your mother? I was cruel sorry to hear she had got gout again."

"She's quite well now and driving about."

"Ask her to look in and see me some day. There's nobody admires her more than me."

"So I will, and how's yourself, Mrs. Daynes?"

"Worried. I never have thought it's anything but unnatural my girls living away from me; and now, as I grow older, I feel it more and more."

"They're such open-air creatures. It would choke 'em to be mewed up in this little shop."

"Duty's duty," said Mrs. Daynes, "and the duty of the child is the parent."

"Not now; that's all a thing of the past. In your young days I daresay you put the fifth commandment first; but they've scrapped the fifth commandment, the young people of this generation."

"They've scrapped most of 'em, if all I hear's true," answered Mrs. Daynes. "Why, just think of this: I'm told, on very good authority too, that my Milly's going to marry a Biddenden man by name of Ernest Brunger. Just think of it—news like that to come to her mother's ear through a third party! It's beyond anything."

"Perhaps there's no truth in it. Milly and Susan both helped to save my hay, along with their Uncle Eli Samson."

"There again," protested Mrs. Daynes, "my own brother, and he don't darken this door once in a twelve-month. We're all friends and all that, but I feel it."

"Why don't you write them a letter and tell them you're coming over to Biddenden to Sunday dinner some fine day?"

She considered.

"I've got my pride. Suppose they said they didn't want me?"

"Of course they want you. They're tremendous busy people, and in a few weeks now Eli will be hop-drying at Hill Crest, and your girls hop-picking. You write and say you've just heard something interesting and are coming to dinner next Sunday."

"If you advise it, I will."

"I do; and I'll tell Eli if I see him."

"Don't you make it a favour, however."

"A favour! It's a compliment to them."

"They tell me the windmill at Biddenden has finished and is to be pulled down."

"That's true. They've taken the stones out already. I'm sorry for my part. It was a brave landmark, and a very fine sight."

"Everything's being pulled down nowadays," she said.

"It's a pulling-down generation, Pomfret. You're a clever man and read the signs of the times. What d'you make of it?"

"Too big a question to answer all in a minute. There's building up going on likewise. Only foundations don't catch the eye, like the fall of big things that used to fill the eye. I must be off. I'm going to have dinner with Miss Witherden and Mr. Witherden."

"I hear of them. The young woman's a beauty and got a nice nature, I'm told. He's come down in the world—so he tells people. Funny thing to keep on about. You'd think a wise man would leave people to find it out."

"He's all right—a very clever man, I believe. Give me some of your best sweets—two bobs' worth in a fancy box."

She nodded and showed him some boxes from which to choose. He selected one with the picture of a girl upon it who, in his opinion, remotely suggested Rosa May.

Mrs. Daynes filled the box with the best she had, and

reminding her to go to Biddenden, the big man departed. He was happy, and let his happiness run over into pennies for the grubby, innocent-eyed children looking into the shop window.

As the church clock struck half-past twelve, he entered the gate of Mr. Witherden's garden and found Canute and Rosa May dressed and waiting for him.

"Thank you ever so much for the wonderful flowers," began the girl. "You must have picked every one in your garden for certain. I've made the house like a flower show."

"How d'you know I brought them?" he asked.

"Because no man in the world but you would have picked such a monster bouquet," she said.

"We propose to take our meal at the 'White Lion,'" explained Mr. Witherden. "It may seem an unusual thing to entertain a guest at an inn, but there is a good deal to be said for it; and, in our case, more to be said than I need say. You know our circumstances, and must not think that we do this from any indifference to the guest—far from it. In fact quite the opposite. The essence of an entertainment is surprise, and many of the upper classes, though they have an ample staff and so on, actually prefer to entertain their friends at restaurants and such-like."

"A jolly good idea," declared Nathan. "You get variety and escape bother."

"But you mustn't think we do this to escape the planning and preliminaries," continued Mr. Witherden. "That would show a lack of real hospitality, and be a very heartless thing to do, in my opinion. No doubt many people entertain in that way—to save themselves the trouble of thinking out the meal, and so on. But it has a frosty side. I may tell you, however, that I was at the 'White Lion' for half an hour yesterday and arranged the bill of fare with Mr. Goodsall himself. I had rather a reputation in my palmy days for this kind of thing. Never large parties, but just a kindred spirit or two, and a refined little meal and a bottle of the best."

Pomfret was rather impressed.

"I hope you haven't been going it on my account," he said. "I don't care a button what I eat, as long as there's any amount."

Mr. Witherden shook his head.

"Now I feel different," he said. "Give me just a succession of snacks—all choice. Of course one can't afford that kind of thing now—in fact I never have been in a position to eat what I call ideal food, excepting on the rare occasions of being entertained, or entertaining others."

"In fact, he's a very greedy old thing," said Mr. Witherden's daughter. "He says it's a natural, aristocratic instinct to like the best, and he's not in the least ashamed of it. But he really has a tiny appetite, I will say that for him."

They sat down anon in one of the bow windows of the "White Lion," where a table was spread adorned with flowers and coloured wine-glasses.

Mr. Witherden showed a sense of quiet satisfaction combined with the consciousness of power. He was alert, and hesitated not to put many commands upon the waitress who attended them.

"We should have begun with six oysters apiece, had there been an 'R' in the month," said Canute. "There is not, however, so you must be content with sardines and olives. The olive is an acquired taste; but I can honestly say I liked them from the first. They sharpen the palate."

"I've seen them, but I never tried one," confessed Nathan.

"I hate them," declared Rosa May.

During the meal Mr. Witherden expatiated on the people of Tenterden.

"In a word they are much like other people," he said. "Some show respect for the name and none for the man—I mean myself; while some show respect for the man and are indifferent to the name. Some, I confess, care for neither one nor the other, and treat me merely as an

insurance agent. Personally, a good name always predisposes me to those who bear it. A good name ought to be an asset, and properly-minded people should give the bearer credit for it. In my case the meaner sort judge me entirely by my modest surroundings and domestic disabilities. One can merely say, 'more shame to them.' "

"I'm sure nobody's such a fool, father," said his daughter; but Canute declared that it was so.

"One notes these things in passing," he answered. "They leave no sting; one is sorry for the offending individual rather than oneself."

"A man ought to be judged by his conduct, and by his ideas and opinions in general," suggested Nathan. "It is a very good thought of yours, Mr. Witherden, to say that a man should find an honoured name stand to him and be a source of strength, because no father can hand his son a better heritage than a name held high and well thought upon. But, in the long run, it's only common justice to judge a man by himself."

"I ask nothing better," declared Mr. Witherden; "yet to err is human, and because it comes to our ears that a fellow creature has made a mistake here and there, we mustn't let that rob him of respect, or rule him out of enlightened society. Let those without sin cast the first stone. For my part, whatever my faults, I have a genius for charity, which embraces everything human. This is Burgundy—not a costly wine, but sound and generous. No, Miss Witherden doesn't drink wine. Help yourself."

Encouraged by his host's opinions, Nathan Pomfret desired if possible to put him to the test on his own account. He guessed that Canute Witherden had probably learned all about him and his family, but felt a very genuine doubt how such a man would be likely to view the circumstances of his birth. His assurances of "a genius for charity" cheered Nathan; then, as before, he fell to asking himself what Mr. Witherden's opinion signified, and why he should seek to learn it. He grew silent as the meal progressed.

A sudden desire, inspired by the other's assertions, attacked Nathan to plunge into this matter and speak intimately to Mr. Witherden. It was absurd and he knew it. Had Canute been anybody else, he would have certainly won none of such a man's confidences; it was because the elder happened to be Rosa May's parent that Nathan desired to speak to him. This was in fact the powder in the jam of that entertainment. Pomfret again found himself, as it were, divided in two camps. And here was Canute Witherden similarly divided into two and become a dual personality. For himself, Nathan regarded him as rather a joke—pretentious, affected and silly, though good-natured withal; but as Rosa May's father, he became a personage, and made Pomfret anxious. He found himself longing to speak, and he quite failed to do justice to the really excellent luncheon that Mr. Witherden had planned.

"Grilled ham and green peas, in clever hands, can be made a course worthy of a royal banquet," said the host. "Given adequate York ham and the master touch to grill it, together with marrowfats boiled with leaves of mint—in fact you make a mistake not to have some."

"I will if you wish it," said Nathan, like a well-mannered schoolboy.

"You will not regret it," Mr. Witherden assured him. "It may amuse you to know that, since my reverses, I have sometimes given a thought—a personal thought—to the science of the table. Rosa May is quite a good plain cook—capable, and courageous, and intelligent. She mars very little. From force of character she has mastered the vital branches, but feels no natural prompting to soar to higher fields. Therefore, in my leisure moments, I have taken a hand. I tell you this in confidence, and will ask you not to let it go farther."

"He's a genius," declared Canute's daughter. "He finds that he has wonderful talent for cooking. I believe all thoroughly greedy people love cooking, only they'd be ashamed to say so."

"I'm not greedy, and I don't love cooking," answered Canute; "but where you find native refinement of character combined with a delicate appetite, then nature seems to come to the rescue, if the subject is stranded by the action of mischance—as in my case. We have a good general servant in prospect, however. Being idle for the moment a month ago, I dipped into one of Miss Witherden's cookery books. What did I find? A dissertation on the egg. The egg seems to have been, as it were, a special dispensation of Providence for those of delicate appetite, nice instincts and reduced circumstances. The egg and the herb of the field are absolutely sufficing for a man like me. Let me ring the changes on the egg combined with bread of wheat, fresh green salads, fresh butter, a trifle of Italian cheese, and a flask of Rhine wine. I ask nothing more."

Rosa May left them after luncheon, and Nathan was glad, for he thirsted to speak with her father about himself. He remembered the box of sweetmeats just in time, and was pleased with himself that he had done so, for they enabled him to take a graceful leave of her.

Brightly she thanked him, admired the box very heartily, and laughed when he said the lady on it had reminded him of her; then she offered her father a sweetmeat, which he declined, helped herself, took leave of Nathan, and was gone.

"We will smoke a cigar and drink our coffee here in this window," said Mr. Witherden. He placed himself in a position where passers-by could note him, and brought a cigar-case from his pocket.

"I will not disguise from you that they are not Havanas," he said. "They are Borneos, and, while it would be an affectation to pretend that I prefer Borneos to Havanas, I still can say with honesty that a Borneo of the best class, such as this, is an admirable thing in every way. You have no doubt noticed that some cigars go better with coffee than others?"

"Can't say I have."

"It is so, however. A Borneo, among its other virtues, will be found to assimilate in a very agreeable way with coffee. Allow me."

Nathan was about to bite off the end of his cigar, but Mr. Witherden anticipated the sacrilege.

"Never do that. I have made a study of cigar cutters, and found this little patent implement the best. You observe it leaves the point intact, but judiciously punctures the tobacco exactly one-third of an inch below the point. You will find how amiably your cigar holds the mouth now. Moreover it's life is prolonged."

The insurance agent was in a happy and expansive mood. He threw unconscious light on his own character, and dilated over his career, casting a warm glow of successful achievement upon the past which made the present somewhat bleak by contrast. Pomfret found it difficult to enter upon his own affairs, and the more so because his motives were but still half revealed to himself. An opportunity occurred, however. Mr. Witherden became pensive as his 'Borneo' drew to a close, and showed an inclination to lament his fortune and repine at the prospects of the immediate future.

"We've all got difficulties to face and puzzles to solve," said Nathan. "I'm a reticent man by nature, I believe, but I feel driven to speak to you. Will it bore you if I tell you something about myself?"

"Far from it. Are you insured—your life, I mean?"

"I'm not. I dare say it might be worth while."

"Not a doubt of that. I'm not asking professionally; but, as an agent, people do put a certain amount of confidence in me. I win it."

"It wouldn't be misplaced for certain," allowed Pomfret. "Well, regard me as a client, but not now. In my case, the circumstances of my birth are a bit unusual."

"I heard something—people show an inclination to talk. But I silence them. I'm very particular about not discussing things that don't concern me."

"May I have another cigar? They are grand smokes. I'll thank you to tell me where you get them."

Mr. Witherden, now that he could excuse a second cigar to his conscience, brightened. Indeed, Pomfret went further and ordered liqueurs. He then proceeded and gave the elder a sketch of his position in the world as the natural son of the late Peter Crowns. His sole object was to learn the opinion of Mr. Witherden on such a condition; and if in his heart he hoped that the other would attach no importance to it, he was swiftly disappointed.

Mr. Witherden's attitude was that of a sympathetic, but inexorable Mrs. Grundy.

"I can imagine no more painful skeleton in the cupboard than a bar sinister," he said.

"You regard it as a stigma, then?"

"Speaking, of course, quite impersonally, one is bound to do so. I suppose there is no broader-minded man living than myself, but I must bend to human and divine ordinance. The wisdom of ages has decided the question, Church and State and Law are agreed about it, and the revealed Word has told us that the sins of the fathers are visited on the children. That is God's mysterious purpose, and nowhere does it appear more bitterly than in the case of those born out of wedlock."

Pomfret was aghast. He had taken it for granted that few intelligent men at this date could regard his situation as derogatory, and indeed, among his own circle none did.

"D'you suggest any slur hangs to it, or that a fact like that alters our opinion that each man must be judged by himself?" he asked.

"Speaking again without the smallest personal application, I feel it must make a difference," answered Canute; "in the mind of the righteous, a fundamental fact like that cannot be ignored. Sin is sin, and the wages of sin is death—if not to the sinner, then to the unfortunate result of the sin. And when I say 'death,' I don't mean extinction of life, Mr. Pomfret, but what may be far worse than

that. The being thus handicapped is at such a terrible social disadvantage in a really Christian country that one is hardly straining language to say that he is dead. Such a man demands our profound sympathies, and being as I personally am—one himself sweetened in the furnace of affliction—I might probably feel more tender to the innocent sufferer than most men of the world would feel."

"Nobody's ever said anything like that before," answered Pomfret rather glumly.

"Probably because you don't go among your neighbours in an inquiring spirit. I should not have dreamed of speaking, had you not asked me for my personal opinion. It is not that the community lacks charity, or fails to credit an honest man when it meets one; but a sleepless dread of irregularity is, I am proud to believe, still an English virtue. We probably owe our greatness to it. And in the case of those irregularly born, experience has taught us that they should not be recognized and received in quite the same spirit as ourselves. That would be an injustice to those who do not labour under the sins of their parents. If we punish the child for his father's errors, we must also reward the child for his father's virtues. We agreed about that at lunch, I think?"

"How would you mark the difference, then?"

"I should never be censorious," answered Mr. Witherden. "I should never throw a stone at the individual born out of wedlock. Far from it. If I could do such a person a good turn, I should regard it as a duty and a privilege to do so; but, other things being equal, I should feel it my duty to draw the line in favour of one who did not labour under this cloud."

"In matters of marriage for instance?"

"In matters of marriage, it is a scandalous fact that parents are seldom asked their advice nowadays. But most emphatically I could not approve of such a one contracting an alliance with anybody in whom I was interested. Could you? We owe it to ourselves and our

progeny. I feel this deeply, both as a Witherden and as a Christian. I am proud of being a Witherden, and I am still more proud of being a Christian. The Witherdens belong to that class of which we may say it is the backbone of England. I would rather belong to the great middle-class of England than to any other order in the world. When I tell you this, you will easily see what my views on every sort of irregularity must naturally be."

Nathan rose.

"I must be going," he said. "I'm wasting your time."

"Not at all. To discuss questions of importance with an intellectual equal is never to waste our time," said Canute. "There are few here more likely to interest me outside my professional duties than yourself. In fact you and your family will always find a friend and admirer in me. Your sister is a very good companion for Rosa May, and Mr. Crowns is a very fine fellow, with sound conservative opinions and the fire of youth. I seldom have found so much in common with a younger man."

"He's been to see you?"

"He has, and I hope he will come again. We are to sup at Hill Crest shortly. Rosa May has quite fallen in love with Mrs. Crowns."

"My mother."

Mr. Witherden bowed slightly, as though to indicate it might be so, but was not an aspect in which he desired to approach or applaud Mrs. Crowns.

Then they parted, the younger in a spirit of gloom that he was too ingenuous to conceal, the elder polite, pleasant, and imperturbed.

"I will give myself the pleasure and privilege of putting before you the mysteries and immense advantages of life insurance at an early date," he said.

CHAPTER X

A CAMPAIGN FOR A BISHOP

NATHAN POMFRET, remembering a promise, and being on the spot to keep it, now visited Mr. Fuggles. His spirit was dreary, and though he hardly cared to investigate the reasons that had caused him to be cast down before the reactionary opinions of Mr. Witherden, cast down he was. He had grown so accustomed to the general indifference concerning the accident of his birth that this sudden experience of another attitude mortified him a little. And that such a view should appear in this particular quarter especially discouraged him.

By a coincidence the matter of his mind proved to be in the direct line of the new campaign launched by Mr. Fuggles, and Nathan now found himself in an atmosphere more intelligent and more congenial.

With a sort of sardonic laugh he spoke of his rebuff, and Mr. Fuggles expressed no surprise.

"Don't imagine it's a peculiar case," he said. "On the contrary, the vast majority of men and women think like Canute Witherden. If they didn't, I should not probably have had to tackle the problem."

"Surely all that nonsense is a thing of the past?" asked Pomfret, but the other shook his head.

"No it isn't. I'll explain."

Mr. Fuggles loved a demonstration of this sort, when he could get anybody to listen to him, and now he proceeded in his usual incisive style.

"There are three sorts of people in England, Pomfret. They merge and run into each other, but, roughly speaking, there are three sorts. And they are the Norman, the

Anglo-Saxon—though why that's the name for them nobody could tell you—and the British. Historians think the ancient British were obliterated. They were not. They survive in the labouring classes; while the Anglo-Saxon represents the middle class, and the Norman the aristocracy. The aristocrat, of course, has practically gone now. He lost his sense of class and aloofness after the Commonwealth. *Noblesse oblige* was a spirit that utterly vanished when the aristocracy of Norman blood was flooded with Anglo-Saxon lawyers and merchants and such like middle-class stuff. Now we see the sons of this mixture—I speak from the blood point of view—mingling with yet another order—the hybrid women of America. Men of rank to-day care not through what channel they stream their blood, so long as there is gold to be picked up in it. The last of the Norman ruler blood is practically drowned out, and with it has vanished the spirit of autocracy. The plutocracy, that has taken its place, cannot rule, because the democracy will not be ruled by a debased order, which they know it to be."

"So much for the Upper Ten, then," said Nathan.

"Yes, they have sold their birthright and are negligible for ever. Then we come to the Middle Class—the backbone of the nation—which like the backbone of the ass, bears the bulk of the burden. They groan, or bray under the weight of it, but do no more. This is my own class and yours, yet I entertain precisely the same contempt for it that I entertain for the polluted aristocracy. It is equally futile. It sinks under its sole preoccupation of making money, and while ceasing not to whine, is too busy to fight. It is a mean class, without noble ambitions, or any sense of perspective. It is a most undignified class, content to be the prey of the State. Like a wasp it will go on sucking while its wretched body is being cut off; but, unlike a wasp, it appears to be powerless to defend itself against its enemies."

"That leaves the British?"

"Yes; and here you find life and vigour and power. They know what they want, and they are out to get it. They don't sit and whine. They stand on their hind legs and hit right and left. Labour is alive, and the hirelings of Labour—the Trades' Union people—earn their money. I respect our ancient British blood, because it means to get its own back; I despise the Anglo-Saxon blood, because it is a coward, and, despite its immense strength, won't fight back, and refuse to pay the taxes that are strangling it, and revolt against the tyranny of governments and the injustice of laws. It hasn't even the wit to organise and pay members of its own class to fight for it! It won't put its hand into its pocket to do that. And so it pays and obeys and suffers and snivels, because it is too mean-spirited and abject to do anything else. The Anglo-Saxons have the instincts of slaves, and deserve to be treated as such. But—now I'm coming to you, Nathan—it is this class that is most saturated with cant. It can't help thinking and living and judging everything in terms of cant. It is, therefore, this class that regards you as outside the pale. The aristocrat and the folk people never shudder before the spectacle of the natural born. In both classes the incident is such a thing of every day that their charity and common sense is under no strain to accept and tolerate. But it is the middle class of Church and Chapel-goers who ban and bar, and talk Witherden's drivel about the sins of the parents being visited on the children."

"Witherden did."

"He would. It belongs to him. And the middle class it is who outlaw such as you—not the last dregs of the Norman blood still trickling in the veins of the upper people, nor yet the abundant torrent of good red British blood of the working-class. And that brings me to my campaign."

He brought some letters out of a drawer.

"Labour's the great idea—Labour's the conqueror. The Upper Ten have not the sense to go to Labour direct;

while, as mediators, the middle class, of course, is useless."

"In the matter of breeding, the nobs think more of the sires and dams of their race-horses and cart-horses than the sires and dams of their own children," said Nathan.

"Exactly. There's an utter loss of all high instinct, and fine thinking, and pride of good blood. Now I've sent a letter to the Bishop of Maidstone, Pomfret."

"A bishop!"

"You're naturally surprised; but the reason will appear. I'm not in the least sanguine, of course; but seeing that a bishop with a seat in the House of Lords might rectify this wrong with a minimum of trouble to himself, I have taken it upon me to give this eminent Churchman the hint and the opportunity to do a proper thing. I have naturally written with utmost deference. In fact I am pleased with my letter."

Mr. Fuggles then recited his communication.

"THE HYDRANGEAS,

"TENTERDEN.

"July, 19—.

"To the Bishop of Maidstone.

"MY LORD,

"May I submit to you the consideration of the natural-born child? When, long ago, it was decided by a cruel law that children born out of wedlock 'have no heritable blood,' the Church, very properly, cried out against such an enactment, and held that the distinctions the law then established were in the highest degree iniquitous and unjust. But the protest was not sustained and the evil remains to this day in our Statute Book, simply because no great and powerful voice is lifted to sweep it off.

"Our law is the worst law of all civilized countries on this subject, and the fact that subsequent marriage does not render a child born out of wedlock legitimate still blots our code. All great nations save our own have long righted this wrong. In Scotland it has been righted; in Germany humanity goes further, and there, on the application of its

father, without marriage, a child is declared legitimate and acquires the rights of legitimation.

"My Lord, you could bring in a short bill to put this dreadful evil right. Such a bill would be practically non-contentious, for there is no sane, no rational man in the House of Lords, or the House of Commons, or England, who would not gladly subscribe thereto. Indeed, it amazes most people to learn that the law is otherwise. It has been said that the English Church has a grave responsibility in this age-long conspiracy against helpless innocents. The protest of the parent Church is on record. The command of the Master is 'Suffer little children to come to me and forbid them not.' Silent acquiescence in such an abuse as we are considering is tantamount to a conspiracy.

"There are about 50,000 children born of unmarried mothers in Great Britain yearly, and the appalling mortality among them will be known to you; while those who survive (by their disabilities and the fact that in the eyes of the law they continue to be 'the children of none') are handicapped out of hope or opportunity in the battle of life, and so, too often, submerged to their own ruin and the grave loss of the realm.

"My Lord, you have the power to right this wrong, and should you lift your voice and exercise that power, all thinking men will bless your name.

"I venture to think this moment is one peculiarly appropriate for safeguarding the next generation and releasing an appreciable number of those who are to follow us, from the unjust conditions which will control them.

"Yours, with all respect,

"MARTIN FUGGLES.

There was nothing new here for Nathan.

"The old points, but a very good letter. Has he answered it?" he asked.

"His chaplain has. The bishop says he is very much interested, but doesn't quite understand what I want him to do. I smell the middle-class attitude. He's hedging a bit, but doesn't like to ignore me right out. He asks as to within what limits I would restrict the legislation."

"You make that clear."

"So I thought; but now I've made it clearer. I wrote again, thanking him and explaining that all I want is to bring our law into conformity with that of other enlightened countries. I added that our rule in this matter has no parallel in Christendom, or Islam, and ventured to declare that it needs only to be stated to win universal condemnation. What he will say to that I don't know."

"I shall be a bit interested to hear," replied Nathan. "He'll have you somewhere, I reckon. It's too much to hope he'll see it like you do."

"If he's an Anglo-Saxon, I should fear the worst," confessed Mr. Fuggles. "But he's not altogether, and a spiritual peer ought to be an aristocrat in spirit. Anyway I'm giving the Church a fair chance."

Pomfret shook his head.

"Useless. When this thing's done, it will not be done by bishops, or lawyers either," he foretold.

"I'm afraid you're right, but I have selected this bishop rather carefully. Of course some are past praying for; but in this case his record leads me to hope that he may possess the necessary spark of imagination and breadth of mind."

"Why do you think so?" asked Pomfret, rising to be gone.

"Because he's in sympathy with advanced thought in the Church, and mixes with the bigwigs. There's no Norman blood in him, I confess; but I believe there is British blood. He's a child of the people, and only removed one generation from them."

"But he doesn't like it mentioned. I happen to know that from a curate in a parish near by me."

The face of Mr. Fuggles fell as he put away his papers.

"If that is really the case, then it's all up," he said. "The man that wants to hide his grandfather is, of course, body and soul of the lower middle class, and as such, beneath the notice of spirited people. Not to know who your grandfather was may be a mere accident of chance

and perfectly pardonable; but to know who he was and wish to conceal him——”

Martin Fuggles could find no words for this perfidy. He shook hands with Nathan, promised to report progress, if progress could be reported, and bade him farewell.

Then Pomfret went home in a state of depression very foreign to him. He told himself again and again that his frame of mind was absurd, that he had heard nothing surprising, and that the views of Mr. Fuggles sufficiently illuminated the opinions of Mr. Witherden; though none the less he deplored these opinions, and cast about in his mind whether it might be possible to destroy them. But he felt in his deepest consciousness very sure that the leopard would change its spots sooner than Canute Witherden his middle-class attitude. He brightened slightly with the thought that Rosa May differed very radically from her father in most ideas, and might in this; but he darkened again when he considered that such a subject was not one for Rosa May's ears in any case. He so far subscribed to the opinions of his class that at no time did he discuss vital questions with young women; and this was a situation which in his view could certainly not be approached as an ordinary topic in mixed company. Yet, under possible circumstances, it might have to be approached.

Then he made a resolute effort to fling the matter out of his thoughts. He had returned home by way of the Mill Pond, and finding himself now near the lonely cottage of Miss Dunk—a spot known as “Peak”—he went in to learn how her sick brother fared.

CHAPTER XI

SARAH DUNK AT HOME

IN a valley at the bottom of Bugle's great meadows was a copse that had been recently cut down for hop-poles; and here, on a patch of barren, stony land, the churn-owls loved to purr at dusk. Beyond, the hill rose again covered by a wood, and on the summit of the height, peeping from the edge of the trees, stood the little lonely cottage of the Dunks.

It was a wooden house with red tiles, and one brick chimney rising above them. It looked like some wild thing that had crept to the edge of the wood and was peering out, ready to take cover at a moment's notice.

Round it extended a small garden, with beans and peas under a few fruit trees; and behind the cottage stood strange, round objects separated from each other, and suggesting the bee-hive huts of neolithic man. Each was a centre of Sarah Dunk's industries, for she had built them herself, and in one she cooked—the chimney pot was an old pail; in another she kept her stores; a third was for the moment at the service of a tortoiseshell cat and five kittens. The house was so small that these additions proved absolutely necessary in Miss Dunk's opinion.

Nathan Pomfret now appeared and had speech with the invalid, William Dunk. The old man sat in the garden on a wicker chair with cushions. He was easy to-day, but preserved his usual taciturnity. Grey-headed, and of a massive and sturdy build, he waited calmly for his end. It was his habit to agree guardedly with most sentiments uttered in his presence; and if he disagreed, then he did not answer. This had been his rule of life. He claimed

that none had ever kept himself more to himself for seventy-five years than William Dunk. He had seen the sea twice and London once during that period, and felt no desire to visit either again.

Beside him sat an old spaniel—about the same age for a dog as he was for a man. In speaking of the dog, Mr. Dunk showed a spark of imagination.

“A very good, well-meaning dog, and I could wish he had a soul, and that we’d meet again,” he said. “However, what you don’t know about, you don’t miss, so it’s all one to him.”

Pomfret was doubtful whether William had done well to come to “Peak.”

“In your uncertain health, you ought to have stopped nearer the doctor,” he said.

“You can’t have it both ways,” answered the old man. “I felt to want solitude and be nearer the woods. Trees are a darned sight better neighbours than humans, and as Sarah thought the same, we ordained to come. We’ve been here six months and are contented.”

“It’s like this,” explained Sarah, “and William can bear me out. I did everything for him till he married, at sixty-five, and, after that, my way didn’t lie clear before me. So I left it in Higher Hands and marked time. Some would have gone off on their own account and very like done the wrong thing. But it was a good example of letting Providence have its own way, and I was well rewarded for waiting. For in two years William’s wife went home, and he hadn’t had much luck with her neither. A high-minded woman, but she never understood the likes and dislikes of my brother, so it was all for the best, as everything is; and I came back to him. Then, when his health broke, he wanted to be alongside forest trees, if it could be done, because his heart was in ’em; so we cast about and found this place.”

“It’s all true what she says,” declared William. “She works for me, and no man ever had a better sister.”

"Come in and look round, Nathan Pomfret," urged Miss Dunk. "You'll be pleased. 'Waste not, want not,' is my motto, and none can say I don't get the last ounce out of every natural object. A box is just a box to most women, and when 'tis empty, they'll throw it by, or use it for firewood. But to me a good box may be the promise of a cabinet, or a cupboard, or the beginning of a chest of drawers. Here's one painted black, you see, and ornamented with cotton reels at the corners—furniture, you might say, yet only a deal box in reality."

Nathan admired her ingenuity and inspected the tiny sitting-room. It was so full of Sarah's achievements that one could hardly move in it.

"Here's a picture of my father," she said. "He was a butcher at Biddenden, and at thirteen years old his nose was very near kicked off his face by a frolicsome colt. But they saved it for him with stitches, though it spoiled his beauty. A good butcher he was—began in a shanty and finished in a shop. It was no wonderful thing to see ten or twelve carcases hanging there together. I'm showing you his picture, however, for the frame. You wouldn't think that beautiful shining metal was an old sardine tin, yet so it is; and many such-like things I do. You might say without a lie that there's hardly an ornament in this house that didn't begin its life as something else. Nearly all my tackle was different once."

"Not these though, Sarah," said Nathan, regarding a pair of china figures on the mantelshelf. They represented a shepherd and his lass.

"No," she said, "they were pure ornaments from the first, as you can see. They belonged to my grandparents and were handed down. They're very ancient, and may be valuable. They are Scotch, and they tell me I shall wash the colour off in time; but I don't believe it. I've been washing 'em for fifty years. 'Tis true I've washed her eyes out. They were black, and gave a fine look to the face. But they've gone. His are standing to him, however."

Beyond reach of William, Pomfret again hinted that Miss Dunk had been doubtfully wise to bring her brother here; but she would not have it.

"We were of a mind about it," she said. "We came because it was lonely. He likes the woods and the wild creatures about; and I like the peace and quiet. I'm not against my fellow humans, understand me, but I can't suffer the sort that are always dropping in to kill their time and waste yours. But here they don't come, and my temper's so much the sweeter. And, as William says, 'death don't wait for doctors.'"

She showed him other curiosities of her contrivance, and he praised them; then he was arrested by a verse in big, black letters, with a decorated frame made of paper stars, alternate green and yellow.

"That's my religion," said Miss Dunk. "It's all summed up in that. I came across it quite by accident in my forties, and printed it out as you see with great care. Each letter is taken out of the big type of a newspaper, really, though you'd never think so. I've had it by me ever since. Comforting, I call it."

Pomfret considered the verse, which ran thus:

"He holds the key of all unknown, and I am glad.
If other hands should hold the key,
Or if He trusted it to me,
I might be sad."

"It covers everything," confessed Nathan.

"Glad you think so. I do what I can, and what I can't, I leave to my Maker. I've been a busy woman, and always looked upwards for help, and I've been average good, to say it without false pride. I've done what I can for Him, and no doubt He'll do what He can for me."

"Without a doubt He will, Sarah."

They joined Mr. Dunk. His sister was excited at the sound of her own voice, and he noticed it.

"Don't you let her chatter too much. We don't talk a lot here, and if she lets go on a stranger, it gets up into her head."

"She's a wonderful clever woman, William, and I tell her so to her face," declared the visitor.

"She is—and cunning too—cunning as a serpent, though all in a lawful way," said William. "Look at that row of peas yonder. You'd think doubtless that they were proper seedsman's peas and had paid the price. But they ain't. They're just grocer's peas, and three halfpence that row cost, and no more!"

Pomfret applauded.

"However you escaped a husband, Sarah, I can't guess," he said.

"It wasn't for want of asking," declared William.

"A man offered for me when I was thirty-three," confessed Miss Dunk. "And he gave as his reason that I was so ingenious. A very clever man himself, and a good man, and I liked his ways and his opinions well enough; only he had a port wine mark all over his face and I couldn't have lived with it. You may say it was just a fancy on my part; but so it happened to be."

"He got another woman, however," added the brother.

"He did—one of Farmer Thirkell's girls—fairly driven into it by her mother. And some said he'd be sure to hand on his defacement, and some said he would not. In fact there was a betting on the quiet about it. But nothing ever could be settled, which was a pity, I think, because it was a very interesting subject. They didn't have no family, and some say they marked people don't breed; but I can't tell as to that."

To please them Nathan stopped, while Miss Dunk brewed a pot of tea in one of her neolithic huts. They drank it sitting beside William out of doors, and the visitor asked after Sarah's pretty niece.

"I'm a lot troubled about Nina," she said. "There's your Henry Honeysett after her, and there's your brother's Johnny Hook after her, and 'tis a case of 'like master like man,' in a manner of speaking, for Henry is a chap very much after your pattern, and I think very well of him,

and Johnny's a rip, and I don't like his opinions and manners. If Henry could only be a bit more pushing; but Hook carries all his best strawberries on top of the basket, and makes a great show, and I don't trust him a yard. I was on to Mr. Crowns a bit ago about it, but he says they must fight it out."

"So they must," declared Nathan. "Nina's got to decide. Perhaps she doesn't want either of them."

"She's death on Hook," said William Dunk. "In fact I believe they're engaged to each other."

"Then they'd better get disengaged again," snapped out Sarah.

"You put it to Henry," suggested the master of Bugle. "It isn't a subject a man could touch to another man; but if you think Honeysett's the right one, give him a hint and tell him his danger. Perhaps he's just jogging along, and doesn't know Hook's in the running."

He left them, and five minutes later met Johnny Hook himself. It was now evening time, and the young man appeared to be seeing Nina home.

He bade them "good evening," and doubted not that Nina's uncle must be right. Indeed, it was so, and Nina had already promised to be Johnny's wife. But with the promise had gone a stipulation: that they must wait until Nina's aunt and uncle were gone and needed her no more. Hook, though an impatient person, agreed to this more readily than his sweetheart expected. But he had his reason.

They spoke together now, and the young man, without sentiment, speculated on how long Mr. Dunk would still dwell among them.

"He'll cumber the earth till winter, I reckon, and then drop," said Johnny.

Nina reproved him, but he blamed her.

"You've set those old things between me and you," he said, "so it's contrary to nature I should want them to live. From my point of view they do cumber the earth.

They are a mean, miserly old couple, else they wouldn't live in a place that's little better than a dog-kennel."

"We're very poor: you know that," she said.

"Of course, of course; but still——"

He changed the subject. A late brood of partridges ran before them through a grass field. The chicks dived into a brake, the mother bird, making wild sounds and pretending to be injured, flapped about in the field to lure them away from her young. Mr. Hook was glad of this diversion, for his own tongue had landed him on dangerous ground. He believed that he knew a little more concerning her aunt and uncle than did Nina; but to let her guess that he held secrets from her on the subject of her own relations, must have put him to very considerable future inconvenience, if not absolute danger.

Therefore he blessed the hen partridge, and presently, when they reached "Peak," entered with Nina, and strove to please her family.

William had no quarrel with him, and let him talk unopposed; but Miss Dunk made no attempt to conceal her dislike. She was in fact rude; but Johnny, with admirable self-command, ignored her censures, and in return paid her great civility.

CHAPTER XII

KENTISH CHERRIES.

AGAINST sunset, Hill Crest's roof towered nobly, in one fretted sweep of rich colour; while eastward rose the great twin oasts. From each cone stuck out a weather-vane, that turned their backs to the wind, and on the horizontal bars of the vanes ramped the White Horse of Kent in miniature. The same figure was stencilled on the master's hop-bags, and every pocket of the coming harvest would carry an impression of the fiery steed and the name of Nicholas Crowns boldly stamped upon its plump bosom.

Beside the oasts, there ascended a sheaf of time-worn Scotch firs, some still prosperous, and some that had fought their fight and would soon be felled. Beyond them a dawn-facing hill sloped to the hop valleys beneath, and here, upon this falling ground, the cherry orchards spread.

Now they were full of the life of the farm, for it was their hour, and the crop was being garnered.

Ladders stood against the trees, and men picked right and left, with Johnny Hook among them; while, below, Susan and Milly Daynes were packing the round baskets, and Jenny Crowns, with Rosa May, helped them. A little tent of sacks had been rigged in the midst, where stood the scales and weights, and all round it glistened piles of fruit, red and white and black. In a corner of the tent there reposed a mournful heap of grey and black robbers cut off red-beaked from the joy of life. For guns ceased not in the orchards, and at the work of shooting thrushes and blackbirds Nicholas himself, combining an element of sport with his business, excelled. Rupert Swadling, released from hop-worship for a while, drove a

cart, which came and went, lumbering over the orchard grasses, and conveying loads of packed baskets, to the railway station, a mile distant.

The snowy clouds of spring blossom, that had fluttered and showered their petals on the winds of May, now fulfilled their promise. Over the grassy hill, kept verdurous through the fiery days of high summer by their shadows, the cherry trees prospered—three hundred of them—and their boughs were bending with tons of fruit.

Seen from beneath the unnumerable lance-shaped leaves, each streaked with light, made a hatched and shining pattern across the branches, and through this bright garment, so regularly woven, there broke from the stout grey boles beneath a forked, ascending network of boughs that supported the round canopy of each tree. Against this framework fell the leaves, and the effect was so ordered, the pattern so severe and restrained that one had imagined a conventional design based on Nature's more lavish plan rather than a scheme of beauty itself natural. But the life of the orchards, the supreme touch that lifted the heavy summer green and wakened each tree to life and lustre, lay in the glory of the fruit. Tame had the hillside been but for the cherries that hung so joyous and sparkling on every bough, and with their weight drew down the branches into graceful arcs about each tree. To the very finials of old wood, the scarlet and black, the cream and ruby climbed, now in clustering branches, now threading each leafy limb with beads of many colours. They had come to ripeness together, and every berry of a million berries took the sun on its cheek and flashed one little point of golden light from its polished surface. They crowded the sprays, and hung in glittering curves against the inner darkness of each tree; they drew a maze of radiance over the foliage; while the noonday sun penetrated each tree mass and threw upon the grass beneath a dancing shadow mottled and chequered with little discs of light. The fruit blazed like precious stones, and all famous

cherries dwelt here and touched branches in amity. Amid the venerable trees, some nigh a century old, young cherries sprang up where veterans had departed, and their bejewelled boughs met sometimes, so that blood-red and purple-black berries glittered together and made contrast with the warm rose and amber of the great "white-hearts." Here and there sprang a bough that had broke from the stock below the scion and been neglected. Upon them, sprays of little, wild, black cherries sparkled as brightly as any, and added their useless harvest to the rest.

"If the birds would only take those," said Rosa May.

"The birds are like most other people," answered Nicholas, who ascended from below with two dead thrushes: "they want the best they can get, and the least trouble to get it."

The billows of green fell away and were lost in summer haze. At orchard edge, the final boughs had the sky for background, and their pendant leaves and fruit were etched sharply against the blue. But all began to lose their finery fast. Persistent, dry, musical notes rang from aloft. They were the sounds of men's feet on the ladders, for many of the rungs under their iron-shod boots gave out melody as of a xylophone. There was a hum of insects too, audible through the chatter of voices, and in corners as yet unapproached many wings fluttered and the blackbirds, starlings and thrushes fed.

Nicholas, tiring of slaughter, handed his gun to Johnny Hook, and the latter, well pleased, hastened to the tent, filled his pockets from a pile of cartridges that lay there, and stole off. A jay was shrieking at the bottom of the orchard, and Johnny dreamed of its wing in Nina's Sunday hat.

There appeared then two figures from the farm, and approached the tent under the trees.

"Why, it's father!" said Rosa May.

"And mother," added Jenny.

It had been arranged that Mr. Witherden, whose business

took him past the farm on this day, should call at Hill Crest and pick up his daughter upon the way home; but in the meantime Rosa May had yielded to entreaties and promised to stop to dinner. Her father, who now approached with Mrs. Crowns, was exceedingly glad to hear it.

"I confess," he said, "that I am very tired and shall be grateful for a rest."

"But you haven't been asked, my dear," said Rosa May.

"He is asked now," declared Nicholas. "I hope Mr. Witherden will stop and drink a glass of my father's old port with me afterwards."

"I thank you," answered the elder. "Time was when I should have been driving on business of this kind, and, though an excellent walker, yet I confess the heat of the day has wearied me."

"Have some cherries," said Jenny, tempting him with noble 'Kentish Eagles'; but he declined.

"I must not spoil my dinner with fruit," he said, "but a little liquid refreshment would be very welcome. I have talked a great deal to possible clients at Biddenden, and opened the way to some potential business."

They congratulated him, and then Nicholas took him to the house to rest and drink.

"Your father has a nice choice of language," said Georgina Crowns to Mr. Witherden's daughter.

"He's rather wonderful," she answered, "but he's a very good, kind father."

"I hope Nick's free-and-easy ways don't shock him."

Rosa May was silent, then, after a moment's reflection, spoke her mind. Jenny had gone to help Milly Daynes pack more baskets, and the visitor was alone for a moment with Mrs. Crowns. They had seen each other several times, and Rosa May knew that her friend's mother liked her.

"It's funny in a way," she said. "You'd think that father would care better for Mr. Pomfret, because he's—well, more serious and more of a thinker than Mr. Crowns."

He likes them both, and he's very much flattered by their both being so friendly to us; but, curious to say, he likes Mr. Nicholas best."

Mrs. Crowns on her side reflected. She was weighing cherries with her back turned to Rosa May.

"Yes, you might have thought that Nathan would have been more the sort to suit him; but Nick's the same as his father was: there's something about him, though my own son, Rosa May, that I can't help seeing does win the people."

"And doesn't Mr. Pomfret? I never met a kinder sort of man."

"He does too; but he hasn't got the same light touch as Nick. There's more of the joy of life in Nick. Such a one for a joke."

"I think that Mr. Nathan's jokes are quite as funny as Mr. Nick's," answered Rosa May. "But I am sure they are both splendid. You must be proud of them."

"I'm glad you like them, for one at least likes you exceedingly well," answered Mrs. Crowns; but she was too politic to stop there and make it awkward for her listener. She went on smoothly, as though her last statement was of no particular importance.

"What now, as a stranger, would you say was the finest thing about them?" she asked, but in a casual voice, as though the other's opinion was of little consequence. The reply, when it came, however, astonished her.

"I think the finest thing about them is their beautiful love for each other," answered Rosa May; and Mrs. Crowns was pleased.

"That's well said, and it's perfectly true. Never did two men set such store by each other."

"It must be a precious experience to have such a wise brother as Mr. Nathan," ventured Rosa May, and had anybody else made the remark, doubtless Mrs. Crowns would have agreed with it; but, from Rosa May, the opinion conveyed a subtle significance not entirely agreeable to the

elder woman. There were dawning in Georgina ideas which involved the future of Canute Witherden's daughter. She had not whispered them even to Jenny, but they matured, and now a cloud threatened her enterprise. The very sense and fine judgment of Rosa May, which Georgina had been quick to measure and appreciate, might serve to defeat her gathering purpose. For Mrs. Crowns had begun to believe that at last the desired wife for her younger son was in sight. That Nicholas would ever find a girl in the least likely to satisfy his mother, Georgina had long decided was improbable. She guessed very accurately at the type most likely to hold her son, and anticipated a maiden with beauty and high spirits, little sense, and doubtful temper. But now appeared Rosa May, and Nicholas was obviously smitten. Here were the beauty and high spirits certainly, yet with them went an endowment of intelligence and a temper apparently sweet. In her maternal haste and gratified convictions that something very desirable might spring from this acquaintance for Nicholas, Mrs. Crowns had delayed to consider the subject from Rosa May's point of view. When the girl, therefore, indicated to Georgina's quickened apprehension that it must be good to have so wise a brother as Nathan, the point of view gave her pause. She deliberated within herself as to what Rosa May exactly meant, and she decided—the wish being father to the thought—that Rosa May was thinking of herself, not for Nicholas: that the girl was not implying Nicholas needed a wise brother, but that she envied him the possession of one. This conclusion heartened Mrs. Crowns. Perhaps, at the bottom of her mind, since it was a mind not easily capable of self-deception, she still entertained a doubt that Rosa May's remark implied criticism of Nicholas; but so slight was the suspicion that she ignored it.

They spoke on other subjects, and Georgina felt her heart warm to Rosa May. Then came Jenny, with Milly Daynes, and the business of the cherries proceeded.

They went to dinner presently, and Mrs. Crowns listened

to Mr. Witherden. Their conversation burrowed into the past, and Canute let it be delicately understood that he had moved in a circle that cut a brave segment into the upper middle class. Indeed, he soared beyond it at a point, for his elder brother had been land agent to a noble family, and two sacred occasions in Mr. Witherden's memory revealed him exchanging opinions with a peer. He cited both these events, and implied that, but for the untimely death of his brother, the trend of affairs might have drifted himself and his family into a higher social environment.

"Little things decide our position in society," he declared. "You may often see men of long descent, such as myself, whose races have become afflicted and reduced by the action of time, serving the mushroom aristocracy in quite subordinate situations. Chance determines everything, now that society has agreed that the accident of wealth shall be the first criterion of distinction."

"The Witherdens were always landowners in the old days," said Rosa May. "At least, so Mr. Pomfret told me. He knew a lot more about us than I did."

"That is not to your credit," answered her father. "Mr. Pomfret was right. We lost our possessions after the Commonwealth. Sometimes rich nobodies have snubbed me when I approached them professionally, and I have felt tempted to tell them that they were being rude to a man whose ancestors drew their blades for the first Charles."

"Did you ever actually do so?" asked Nicholas.

"Once only," answered Mr. Witherden, "and the retort was highly unpleasant. No doubt it was also obvious, for we must remember that the mind of moneyed men is generally subdued to their ruling passion. Indignant at some effrontery, I mentioned my ancestors, and how they had fought against armies of Cromwell, whereupon my antagonist—a shop-keeper—replied that I had little to thank them for. 'If they hadn't been such born fools,

you wouldn't be wearing out your shoe-leather on your job now,' said the tradesman to me. I just looked at him—and left him. To have argued would have been vain, for he was a Nonconformist. There are some retorts that need a certain dignity of mind on both sides to be efficacious. But with the average shop-keeper you seldom meet any dignity whatever—of mind or otherwise."

Mr. Witherden sighed over this painful memory, and Rosa May laughed.

"Father's too good for this world in a sort of way," she said, but he reproved her.

"It isn't a case for flippancy, and I wish you had a little more of my pride," he answered.

Then Nicholas stood up for Canute's daughter, while Mrs. Crowns supported the insurance agent.

After dinner, and a glass of port that pleased him, Mr. Witherden went homeward alone, for Rosa May decided to stop and go on helping with the cherries.

"I'll see her back later on," pronounced Nicholas; "I'm my own master for the minute. July's the only lazy month in the twelve for a hop-grower."

Then, supported by the presence of Jenny and her family, Rosa May made an announcement.

"I'm coming hop-picking to Hill Crest presently, father—so you'll have to learn to do without me for a month."

"'Hop-picking!' Do I hear you, Rosa May?" asked Mr. Witherden.

"Plenty of our friends come," explained Mrs. Crowns. "It's a picnic lasting for some weeks, you may say. My husband it was who made it so. He was always on the look out for any excuse to get his friends round him, and he liked to feel the gardens were bringing a little useful money to good neighbours, when they had leisure and inclination to come to him."

"I shall make five pounds with luck, so Mr. Crowns tells me—so will Jenny," said Rosa May.

"That's if you both work hard," added Nicholas.

But Mr. Witherden looked very dubious.

"Times change, and manners and customs change with them, no doubt—still—— As a matter of fact I fear that I shall not be able to spare Rosa May for so long. And there is another grave side. My personal inconvenience would be nothing; but if she comes, then she will be depriving someone who really matters of a little valuable addition to their support."

"I really matter," declared Rosa May. "It will mean a new frock, and you know very well your views about my clothes, father."

"We will talk it over," he answered. "Everything depends upon the point of view, and the circumstances, and one's first duty."

"The point of view is that Jenny wants me to come and enjoy myself and share her bin," replied Rosa May, "and I wouldn't miss it for anything."

They parted then; Mrs. Crowns undertook to show Mr. Witherden a short cut by field paths to the village of St. Michael, where he was bound on his way home; and the others returned to the orchards.

CHAPTER XIII

THE WOOING OF HENRY

WHEN Milly Daynes determined to wed, her sister, Susan, felt that she must take the same step. She might have done so on several occasions, being a fine girl, with a ready tongue and plenty of capacity; but she had seen no man, save one, who impressed her with promising qualities for a husband, and that one had never manifested any desire towards her. This fact, however, did not present any vital objections against Henry Honeysett in the mind of Susan Daynes. She was not self-conscious, and not ignorant of her own solid charms. But Susan knew not that the head man at Bugle had already lost his heart. Her theory of him, as she put it to her uncle, Eli Samson, was that in Henry an excellent possible husband ran to seed.

"There's some chaps," said Susan, "who just let matrimony slip by, because they never think about it, and because no woman happens to come along and knock 'em off their pins. And often they're the best sort too, and when once they get going, you can't beat 'em. But the thing is to start 'em."

As a preliminary Susan suggested that Henry Honeysett should be asked to Sunday dinner by her uncle, and though his first instinct was to refuse, Henry could not well do so since the invitation was put in person. Eli had been over to look at the Hill Crest oasts, where his duties as hop-drier would soon begin, and passing Bugle on the way back to Biddenden, he met Henry and gave the invitation. Surprised at it, and little guessing that Susan Daynes had inspired her uncle to this courtesy, he hesitated, then

blamed himself for such rudeness, and finally agreed to come.

"We live by the windmill," explained Mr. Samson, "and it'll be a bit of a spread in a way, because my sister, Mrs. Daynes from the sweetstuff shop at Tenterden, is coming over. She hasn't seen her girls for a good bit, and she hasn't seen Ernest Brunger yet—him that Milly's going to marry."

"If it's a family party, I'm likely to be in the way," suggested Henry.

"Not a bit—more the merrier," answered Eli; and so Henry accepted, though conscious that he could add little gaiety to the entertainment. He had been a cheerful man till he fell in love, but since that experience, his anxiety and preoccupation with Nina Dunk had chilled his spirit somewhat, and rendered him a duller companion than usual.

Now the day was come, and he set out for Biddenden in his Sunday broadcloth. He found himself much too early for dinner, so strolled past Mr. Samson's cottage by the great silver-grey windmill, on a brick pedestal, which towered beside the southern entrance of the village and spread wide fans upon the sky. He walked on where the flagged pavement for foot-passengers ran on a grassy platform beside the road. The red houses were bowered in fruit trees, and old-world dwellings bulged out upon the main street; while beyond there rose the square mass of the church above its graveyard. Hither went Henry past the "Chequer" Inn, whose doors for the present were closed. Little flower-gardens flashed beside him and the sun shone brightly; but the hour was still, few fellow creatures appeared, and from chapel and church came a louder drone than that of the honey-bees.

He went into the churchyard and sat down where a patch of rolling green humped up into a single mound. It was a burying place that seemed to link modern sepulture with the barrows of old time; but the tumulus on which

Mr. Honeysett now sprawled and lighted his pipe in reality concealed a vault. Here slept members of an ancient family together; and round about, as though certain independent spirits of the clan liked better to lie alone, individual grave-stones bore the same name. For nearly an hour Henry sat and smoked and listened to the psalms and hymns; then followed a silence broken only by the single voice of the preacher, and presently, when the voluntary sounded and the people began to emerge, the head man of Bugle rose, knocked out his pipe, and went his way.

The "Chequer" Inn was now open, and customers came and went. Henry met Eli himself, for the old man had called to see a Sunday paper. They drank together, and then set off for Mr. Samson's home. As they did so, Honeysett admired the windmill.

"It makes a brave show," he said.

"It does," admitted the other, "but its day is over. These here windmills belong to the past, and now, what with such a lot of the corn we get from foreign parts coming to us ready ground, their work's played out."

A tall, thin man, with a long neck and clean-shaven face, overtook them. He was of the steel and whipcord order, with bright blue eyes, a strong mouth, and long legs a little bowed.

"Here's Ernest," said Mr. Samson. "This is Ernest Brunger, Henry—my niece, Milly's, intended—second whip to the Mid-Kent Stagounds."

"We've met before," said Mr. Brunger in a breezy voice. "How's yourself, Honeysett?"

Mr. Samson's excellent house, his own property, stood over against the windmill, and was a long, low building rich in tinctures of russet and amber, ripe and mellow, with diamond panes in the small windows, and an ancient sundial over the south-facing entrance. Other shadows than the gnomon played upon the face of the dwelling, for apple and pear grew to the walls. Under the fruit-heavy boughs a red brick path ran to the entrance, and now Susan Daynes

appeared upon it and welcomed Henry in the friendliest possible spirit.

She was clad to conquer, and Mr. Honeysett, who had only seen her in working drab, felt much impressed by the style and brilliance of her attire. Milly also appeared, and hesitated not to press a lover's kiss on the stern mouth of Mr. Brunger.

"Mother's come," she said. "She's all in a twitter to see you, Ernest."

The huntsman, however, dallied with Milly in the garden, and unhappily his delay was the cause of awakening inextricable confusion in the mind of old Mrs. Daynes; for to her Henry Honeysett had already been introduced by Susan, and from that hour she confused the two strange men.

"Are you both bespoken?" she asked blankly, when Ernest was presented. "Here's Susan bringing forward one young man, and you bringing forward another, and me in the dark about 'em both."

With laughter they strove to explain, but quite failed. The old woman committed dreadful errors during the rest of the entertainment, and when, after tea, they packed her into a hired pony-carriage and saw her start back to Tenterden, she departed in absolute perplexity as to whether Susan was betrothed to Henry, or Milly to Ernest, Ernest to Susan, or Milly to Henry.

As for Susan, she made some play with her mother's mistake, and rather hoped that Mr. Honeysett might be fired at least to a compliment or two when Mrs. Daynes mistook him for her betrothed; but the idea appeared to give him neither amusement nor satisfaction. In fact he apologised to Susan.

"Such good things as you ain't for me," he said with gloomy gallantry, then changed the subject.

The dinner was of a generous character, and all enjoyed it. Mr. Brunger proved talkative, and devoted himself largely to his future mother-in-law. She inquired his way of life, and thought it sounded very dangerous.

"To one like me," he assured her, "the danger is nothing. I've lived with horses all my days, and was on the back of 'em before I could walk. And when old Ledger drops out, which soon he must do, then I shall be huntsman."

"What's it all about?" she asked, "and what do you hunt? I see the dogs and you chaps in your gay clothes go down Tenterden High Street sometimes in the winter, but where you go, and what you go after, I don't know from Adam."

"Stags, ma'am," explained Ernest. "And you mustn't believe all you hear about cruelty and all that. The stags are carted, and with carted stags, in the pink of form and strong as lions, hounds have got to be fast. We've got the fastest hounds in England, I reckon. And if they get up too close to the quarry, a huntsman that understands will call off all hounds but a brace of couples, and they finish the hunt and run him down. But they don't touch him. They know too much for that. When a hound has once been kicked a rood by a stag at bay, he's had enough for his life-time, and don't want a second dose."

"Ernest tells me the stags like the fun as well as anybody," said Milly.

"So they do," declared Mr. Brunger. "And they know so well as we that it's all for sport, and they'll live to run another day. You put a bit of aniseed in the cart that brings 'em and so you get sweet scent breast high and a proper tearing pace that finds out a horse in a mile. That's all our hunt wants—pace. Hell for leather they go on their two-hundred-guinea hunters, and we show 'em sport, I warrant you."

Eli Samson laughed at a recollection.

"They fiery soldiers from Shorncliffe know how to ride," he said. "I remember once a young spark met me at the corner of a big paddock where I was working over St. Michaels way. Hounds were running and he'd got a bit out of the line. 'Open that gate!' he roared to me, as if I was a dung beetle. 'Open it yourself, sauce-box!' I

says, and loosed a bit of language at him. 'Go to blazing hell!' he says, and popped over a stiff hedge like a bird!"

"Is there good money to it?" asked Mrs. Daynes, and Ernest was able to ease her mind on that score.

They ate well, and Susan saw that Mr. Honeysett was handsomely provided. She complained at his appetite, however, and feared that he was not enjoying his food.

"Never tasted a better breast of veal, miss," he assured her, "but I'm off my feed of late. Don't you worry on my account. There's a reason."

They discussed health and symptoms. The younger people as yet knew none, but the language of Mr. Samson and his sister became highly pathological, while the rest listened.

"I don't think either of you has got much to grumble at, all the same," said Susan. "Uncle Eli wouldn't have no rheumatism if he didn't drink such a lot of beer; and you'd be all right, mother, if you took the air a bit and wasn't always stewing in your stuffy shop."

"Somebody's got to stew in it," answered Mrs. Daynes, "and as I haven't got a daughter to do so, I must myself."

"We never were meant for shops," answered Milly. "All for open air, we are; and I've got an open-air man; and no doubt some day Susan will get an open-air man."

"Who knows?" said Susan. "What do you think, Mr. Honeysett?"

"There's more money in shops," he answered, "though not more security. The little shops are all going down before the big ones, and the big ones shake in their shoes before the stores."

"Wish I may die if that's not true," echoed Jane Daynes fervently. "I don't sell half the toys I did before the Emporium came. There ought to be a law against emporiums and such-like. The small people will soon be a thing of the past, and something should be done to protect them."

"Have you ever heard of the Biddenden Maids?" asked Susan of Henry Honeysett.

"I've heard of them," he answered, "and I've seen the picture of them on crockery. But I can't say more."

"Milly knows about them. Tell him, Milly."

"Eliza and Mary Chulkhurst they were called," answered her sister, "and they were born terrible far back in the year eleven hundred. And they were joined together hip and shoulder, but all right in every other way. You might say it was better they should have died, but you'd be wrong if you did. By good hap they were rich. If they'd been work-people, then it would have been better they died, I grant."

"Poor souls!" murmured Henry.

"The end was unfortunate," continued Susan's sister. "They lived joined together like that till they were thirty-four year old, and they did nothing but goodness and kindness to everybody; and then one had the misfortune to die."

"Oh Lord!" said Mr. Brunger.

"I never heard whether 'twas Eliza or Mary that died; at any rate the doctors told the living sister that an operation had got to be done that instant minute, and she'd got to be cut free. And what d'you think she said, Mr. Honeysett?"

"Told 'em to go ahead quick, I should think," answered Henry.

"Not she! Too good a plucked one for that. She answered, 'As we came together we will go together.' And six hours later she fell ill, and presently she died too. And I often wonder if they'll be joined together in the next world, or left to run loose like other folk."

"They'll be loose for certain," declared Mr. Samson. "Think of the fearful affliction to be hitched on to another creature for all eternity!"

"I'm sure they deserve their heavenly reward, poor creatures," said Mrs. Daynes.

"But that ain't all quite," proceeded Milly. "They left a will, and under that will a thousand good wheaten

rolls are given out on Easter Monday, and five hundred loaves and cheese distributed to the poor of the parish. And on the rolls there's a sort of picture stamped of the sisters in their old-fashioned clothes."

They considered these interesting facts until the meal was done. Then Milly and Mr. Brunger went for a walk until tea-time, and Susan, since to ask Mr. Honeysett to go for a walk would have been too pointed, left him to make the proposition.

He did not do so, however, but suggested sitting and smoking in the garden.

Mr. Samson and his sister both decided on a little nap before tea. He went to his room and she had the parlour sofa. Then came Susan's opportunity, and, alone with Henry, she endeavoured to turn talk into personal channels.

She succeeded beyond her highest expectations, but the result was most disappointing. Indeed, long before tea-time Susan had learned that any hope of ever winning Henry must be abandoned.

"You're that friendly," he said, after an amiable remark from her on the colour of his tie, "that you make me feel as if I could talk to you."

"Well, why not? Me and my sister have always liked you ever since we worked for Mr. Pomfret. You're always that fair to the workers—and work harder than any of them yourself, for that matter."

"You know that creature, Hook?" he asked.

"Johnny? Of course. What good-looking girl in these parts don't? He's after Nina Dunk now—quite serious for once."

"So he is, and I'm a lot put about, because, between friends, that's where I'm looking."

Susan's heart sank.

"Fancy!" she said.

"It's strange I should name it," he confessed, "but you've got a way with you, and a kind nature, I should reckon."

"So I'm told," she answered.

"Well, there it is; and I'd be a far better husband than Hook, though I say it, because I'm a lot steadfaster man, and Miss Dunk—Nina's aunt knows it."

"It ain't a thing for aunts," answered Susan; "it's a thing for the woman herself. 'Woman,' I call her, but she's no more than a slip of a girl. I should have reckoned that a fine figure of a man, like you, would have looked round for something more filling to the eye."

"If I'd looked round, I dare say I should have done," confessed Henry; "but I didn't look round. These things happen to a person, or else they don't. To look round would be a cold-blooded sort of way of doing it."

Susan winced.

"You just fell in love at sight?"

"Yes, and that's how it should be."

"And she haven't?"

"I wouldn't say but what she might have done, if Hook hadn't thrust in."

Miss Daynes began to get bored.

"He had as much right to fall in love as you," she said.

"But he's always doing it! Her aunt have sized him up. She knows Johnny ain't the good wearing sort, like me."

Susan played one more card for her own hand.

"Miss Dunk's an old maid, and no girl in love would trouble about what she thought. For my part, as a friend, I should say you were a lot too good for Nina. She's pretty, I grant, but she hasn't the fine appearance and good sense and experience as some of us. If she'd been really prize stuff, Johnny Hook wouldn't have been drawn to her. You know him. You called him a 'creature' yourself. There's as good fish in the sea as ever came out, Mr. Honeysett. I'm not saying an unkind word against Nina. She's a very nice child, but if she likes Johnny better than you, then surely to God you must see, she's not got as much sense as you've a right to expect?"

"He's dazzled her," explained Henry. "The sense is there, but under a cloud, you understand."

"He wouldn't have dazzled me," declared Susan, who had herself tormented Mr. Hook in the past. "He wants everything for nothing, Johnny does. She'd better be careful what she's doing, or she'll find herself left."

A silence fell between them after these alarming words.

"If he did wrong to her I'd break every bone in his body," said Mr. Honeysett after due consideration.

"A fat lot of use that would be to Nina," she answered. "Now I'd better get in and begin to look after our tea. I lay Milly and Ernest are mooning off somewhere and she's forgot all about it."

But Mr. Honeysett was not interested in tea. In fact he decided that he must depart. "I've got to do the milking to-night," he said, "and must get going."

She did not press him to stop. Indeed she took rather a pessimistic view of the situation from a personal standpoint. She suspected that Nina Dunk would soon have enough of Johnny, as others had before her, and agree with her aunt that Henry was the more valuable man. She felt, therefore, that Mr. Honeysett might be regarded as lost to her, and her interest in him waned accordingly. A sense of discomfort hung about Susan for a few days; but it did not last longer. She had little doubt that in the end Nina would come round to Honeysett's way of thinking, and suspected that any efforts on her part to win him would certainly be wasted. She was practical and never threw away energy. "If we hear Nina's going to marry Hook, then I'll start on Henry again," she told herself, "but not before."

And the unlucky lover, being moved by this conversation to think more than usual of Nina, after he had milked the Bugle cows that evening, and driven the milk-cans to the station, went over to "Peak" in hopes that he might see her.

It had grown dusk when he got there, and Sarah was in,

but her niece was not. Miss Dunk had much on her mind, apparently, and made the visitor her whipping-horse.

"I've chucked your fine friend, the grocer, at St. Michaels," she said. "Never again!"

"Why not, miss?" he asked.

"Too fond of putting on the halfpennies. It's the next thing to flat dishonesty in my opinion, and I won't have it no more."

Henry shrugged his shoulders.

"How's William?" he asked.

"Dying," she answered. "He's going fast, and doctor knows it as well as I do, but won't put a name to it. He says he believes William could live another six months if he'd only give his mind to it; but he won't fight. And why the mischief should he fight if he don't want to go on living? They doctors always seem to think that the only thing that matters is to keep a sick creature alive; but often the real thing that matters is to help 'em to die as quick and easy as possible for everybody's sake. 'Keep 'em alive!' 'Keep 'em alive at any cost—to themselves and to other people!' That's what the doctors say."

"It's their trade. You can't ask 'em to polish folk off. It wouldn't be nice."

Miss Dunk sniffed.

"Well, you want Nina, I suppose? And you're a day behind the fair, as you always are."

"Why for d'you say that?" he asked.

"Because she's out along with that blasted Hook, and what's more, she's told me to-day she's going to marry him."

Mr. Honeysett's mouth slowly opened.

"You mean he's dared?"

"Yes, that's just it. He's dared. And she's took him. And a precious fool you look. But she's going to untake him if I know anything. And now it's up to you, Henry Honeysett. And if, with me on your side, you can't get round a thing like him——"

"If she's said 'yes' to him, where do I come in?" he asked. "That puts me down and out, so far as I can see."

"Then I'll find another. I'll look for a man," she said. "If you're going to take it like a sheep takes death, you ain't no good to me, or Nina."

"This is about the damndest day that ever I lived through," he declared. "To think—and not two hours ago there was a woman saying to me that there's as good fish in the sea as ever came out!"

"You're a faint-hearted fool—that's what you are, and no good to any woman," said Sarah fiercely. "I thought better of you. You've had it from me a score of times that the girl liked you very well, till Hook came along with his bluster and bounce; and now, just because the little idiot has said 'yes' to him, you go and throw up the sponge. If he's hit you, why the mischief don't you hit back, and go for the girl all ends up, and get her away from him? That's what a lover would do. Flout him, scorn him, insult him, and if his tongue is cleverer than yours, then show him your fist is harder than his. This generation of men don't know what love is. If you want to get the girl away from him, show him up before her and flatten him."

"'Flatten him'?" said Honeysett blankly.

"Yes, flatten him. Get forty shillings or a month out of him, if you can't do it no other way. Let Nina see he's all wind. Frighten him off her; properly terrify him off her!"

The man stood amazed before such warlike advice.

"And if you don't, I shall," added Miss Dunk. "And if you take steps, then you've got me on your side; but if you're going to whine about there being as good fish in the sea as my niece, then you can go and catch 'em, and needn't darken this door again. So there it is. If you've got pluck to work at the man, then you can trust me to work at the girl; but if you haven't, then I've been mistaken in my good opinions of you, and don't want to see you no more. And now you'd better go. There's no supper for

you here to-night. I dare say they're messing about down by the Mill Pond; and if I heard you'd found 'em there and dropped the man into the water in his Sunday clothes, I'd think a lot more of you than I do at this minute."

Their meeting had taken place beside Miss Dunk's row of green peas, and now she turned her back abruptly on Honeysett, and he crept off. But he did not go hunting Johnny Hook by the Mill Pond. He went home with a mind furious and despondent by turns. He repeated to himself the assurance that he had made to Sarah, and declared again and again to his tormented spirit that this was quite the damndest day he had ever lived through.

CHAPTER XIV

THE MILL POOL

WILLIAM DUNK passed without pain into the unknown. He died suddenly, and the date fixed for his funeral upset a cherished enterprise of Pomfret's. For Miss Dunk, meeting him at Bugle, explained that her dead brother had felt very great regard for Nathan, and that she would hold it a compliment to William if the master of Bugle could see his way to come to the funeral.

He would not refuse, and his walk to the Mill Pool with Rosa May was therefore postponed for two days. But chance rewarded Nathan, for William Dunk's burying took place on a very wet morning, while for his postponed walk the afternoon sun shone and the famous waters were at their best.

The way from Tenterden led through rolling parklands, where stood fine trees. The girl did the talking, and Nathan found himself agreeing with most of her sentiments. For her part she felt supremely contented in his company. A curious sense that it was the right and proper thing for her to walk with Nathan dwelt happily in her mind. She felt for him what she had felt in the company of no other man—a desire to be personal, a delight in the task of learning to know him better, a happy consciousness that better knowledge would increase interest and not lessen it. She was never introspective, and rarely considered her own emotions; but when he put off their walk to the Mill Pool, she found her disappointment challenge her. With him again, however, she was inspired to an emotion of contentment. His slow voice seemed the proper complement to her quick one; his laugh chimed very well with her

laugh. But she could not keep stride with him. She found that as they went along he took three steps to her four. She pointed this out, and he tried to shorten his stride; but when they talked again, he forgot.

They passed through a pastoral valley that had been under water aforetime, where a chain of lakes once rolled. Now it was full of hop-gardens and lush grasslands, and, in moist reaches, water glimmered and mallards flashed a silky grey light over them. Round about lifted the low heads of hills, and some were spattered with kine and flocks. Then opened dingles where red roof-trees and the hop oasts rose, and higher yet, upon the horizon southward of them, above far-off woods, the spire of St. Michaels and the brave tower of Tenterden ascended to offer a land and sea mark.

Rosa May told Pomfret about herself, and to him it seemed that her innocent thoughts were very beautiful. Above all he marked the thread of humour that ran through them. A solemn girl could never have been so intimate without causing him embarrassment, but Rosa May had the unconscious art to lighten her personal narrative, and leave most serious sentences with a full stop of laughter.

She was a Christian, she told him.

"About a thing like religion," she said, "you must make it a personal matter, and you can't be religious because your betters tell you to. You're either religious, or you are not."

"Everybody puts their faith in something," he said. "I don't believe anybody lives who hasn't got faith in something. And that faith is religion. It may be a creed, or it may be a rule of life, or it may be somebody else; or it may be nothing finer than yourself; but whatever you put your faith into—that's your religion. I know a man who doesn't believe there's a God. Well, you might say that he hadn't any faith at all; but he has; his faith is that there's no God, and he's just as keen about that, and it influences him just as much, and makes him as much in deadly earnest as if he was a missionary. That man is

a good man, and he would go to the stake and burn rather than say there is a God. Atheism is his religion."

"And the funny thing is," she said, "that lots of people you know, who aren't a bit religious really, would worry themselves to death about that man, and refuse to know him, and refuse to believe him, and explain him away by deciding that he was mad. Father thinks I'm mad, because I assure him I'm a Christian and yet hate going to church. The old dear is not worth talking about as a Christian himself, yet he wouldn't miss going to church for anything. Going to church always depresses me. I don't like to see men dressed up. Why black and white frocks, and silks and satins—for men? The whole business of a church service will persist in amusing me."

"Better be amused than bored," said Pomfret. "I dare say if people found it more amusing, they'd go oftener."

"Of course, if you really feel you are pleasing God by going, it's quite right, I know," declared Rosa May; "but if you find you are much more serious-minded and getting better thoughts digging in the garden, or picking a bunch of flowers, or even eating a good dinner, then it can't be pleasing God for you to go."

"A crowd all depends on what it has collected itself for," he replied. "I've felt very fine thoughts in a crowd sometimes. The finest thoughts I've ever felt were in a crowd of strikers; but I'm like you, Miss Witherden, a church crowd doesn't buck me up in the least. It's unreal; it's hardly alive at all very often."

"You can see the people growing moribund under your very eyes," she said.

"Is that because what they go to hear is moribund?" he asked.

But this she would not grant. She had her own nebulous ideas on the subject, and believed the Roman Catholics were still alive.

"Your sister, Jenny, would turn into a Roman Catholic to-morrow if she dared, you know"

"My mother wouldn't mind."

"Of course not. She wouldn't interfere with anybody—too large-minded. But your brother storms if she mentions it."

"Nicholas! He's nothing at all."

"That's what's so frightfully funny. Could anything be funnier? If he's got any faith, it's a faith that the Pope is a bad lot, and that if any of his relatives were Roman Catholics, it would be a slur on him. What a ridiculous faith! And yet was there ever a kinder, more delightful man than he is?"

"He's all that. It's only because he hasn't thought out things. He doesn't understand that everybody ought to be free to get the comfort of religion where their bent inclines them. My father was the same. He hated Roman Catholics from a sort of instinct. In his calm moods, he granted there was no particular reason in it. They'd never hurt him personally. But he couldn't alter. He said they had badly hurt the world, and so he hated them."

"My father hates the Jews," said Rosa May; "but in his case he's always quite ready to give the reasons."

And now they came upon the Mill Pool, ascending to it from the gentle slopes below, where other pools, now vanished, had wandered through the valley. The water lay in a wide hollow of fifty acres, moulded beautifully by the contours of the land ascending round it. From the north it opened, where great reed beds filled the mouth of the coomb with sedge and rush, then it advanced by many a meandering line and little estuary, widening ever until it spread in a broad expanse of still water spattered with white and yellow lilies.

In winter they would vanish, and the face of the lake reflect the sky, but now they spread in acres under their countless, over-lapping leaves, and only ribbons and channels of water flung a network among them. Great planes of the lilies floated on every side and extended across the whole sheet of water. Afar off they were one bright

vision of sun fire that flashed from their surfaces; but as they approached, there appeared the plan and symmetry of the leaves, lying like plaited armour on the water. There was life and movement too, for the breeze got under the leaves sometimes, and then the little black edges of their rims lifted upward on the bright surface of the mass, and wove a broken pattern over the shining face of the lily-field. Nearer still the whole expanse of green separated into drifts and clumps, with channels of clear water, some still, some wind-fretted, between them. The pool spread a silver gauze amid the leaves, and imaged the blue above and the warm glory of sunlit clouds. The woodland of the banks was also mirrored, to throw welcome patches of darkness into the dazzle of polished surfaces and reflected sky.

Here nymphæa and nuphar strove for mastery, and the Mill Pool was gemmed through every reach with the white stars of the one, and the golden cups of the other. Sometimes they dwelt apart, and the glitter of the snow-white lilies reigned alone upon the water, or the flash of the yellow lilies lorded it there; but often they wreathed together and their buds broke side by side in galaxies of brightness. Then, like a royal breastplate, the water spread—a jewel of silver encrusted with gold, over which steel-bright dragon-flies rustled their gauzes and flashed in mazes of fleeting fire.

Oak and willow fringed the mere and ran a girdle of green about it—here crisp and dark, here feathery and touched to cold ripples of pallor, where the aspens bent at a breath. Behind the low woods, grassland rolled upward to a horizon of gentle slopes; while at water's edge were sedge and rush, clumps of the great reed mace and a jungle of wild flowers. Yellow and purple loosestrife thronged the mire, with forget-me-nots and meadow-sweet; while above, on the low banks, shone corn-daisies and white bindweeds, dog-roses, and honeysuckles.

Life teemed in air and water. Fish broke the surface of

the pool, now rising heavy and solitary, now splashing simultaneously in little shoals as they warped and turned together. Moorhens ran daintily over the lily leaves, flirting their white tail-feathers and clucking loudly to their tiny chicks. Then, from the leaves they would reach a channel and scutter over the water, or rise and fly clear awhile, with their pink feet hanging down behind. Coots and dab-chicks shared the pool with them, and in late autumn came the wild fowl. Upon the banks the black-bird sang, and overhead the lark. A heron fished in a secluded corner, and water-voles squatted on many a grass tuft to nibble the sugary sedges. At a shadow they flopped into the water, to reappear, paddling hard, their flat noses and beady eyes alone visible.

Eastward of the pool was a bank whence harvest of oak and chestnut, ash and birch, had recently been gathered. In springtime, primroses spattered this clearing, and already, from the stools of the vanished timber, strong leaders sprang for the hop poles of years to come.

With the expanse of the Mill Pool outspread before them, sat Rosa May and Nathan. She bade him be quite silent while she took joy of the scene, and he obeyed and filled his pipe. Close at hand a little willow-wren gathered food for her young.

Presently the girl sighed and spoke.

"You can't praise it," she said. "You can only just quietly love it. It's good to be here, and I shall often come."

"I thought you'd like it. So do I, though it means a mournful memory for me. Away there, under the right bank, my father was drowned. The water is deep, and maybe the boughs of the trees broke the frost a trifle. Anyway the ice is always thin just there. It was night and he didn't see where he'd got. Nicholas went in, too—to save him; but he couldn't. He had a squeak himself before they pulled him out."

"It'll always be sad for you then; and that will make it a bit sad for me," she said.

"I don't feel it sad," he answered. "Things like that don't trouble me. My father often said he'd lived his life and enjoyed it, and didn't envy himself the fag end. He had a curious feeling against growing old."

"Was he like your brother, or like you?"

"His body was built like mine, and his mind like Nick's. He loved pleasure and fun. The joy of life fairly bubbled in him. Mother used to say, 'You needn't fear growing old, father; you never will—not if you live to be a hundred.'"

She made no reply and he proceeded.

"So I often think for a man like him, growing impatient at the hand of Time pinching him here and there, and grumbling daily because he had to give up his beer, and port wine, and so on, that death was no great disaster. I feel the same, for that matter—so did William Dunk. When life's said its full say, and your work's done, and there's nothing doing on earth where you much matter, I'd so soon meet death half-way as try to run about and dodge him."

"But when is a man's work done?" she asked. "And how can you tell, or anybody, when you've ceased to be worth your keep? Who can see all their work? Any day may bring new work worth doing. And while there's anybody left to love the old, their work's not done."

"The love of the old is a peculiar thing," he answered. "I don't know what it is about the old, but you'll very seldom find they've got very many to love them. Of course I mean the really old—people with their children middle-aged and fighting the battle of life for yet another generation rising up. It's a great feat for a very old person to be content, even if they've every right to be and know their record is noble. For they're cumbering the earth most times, and often standing between other people and things they may badly want. And they may feel they're putting a good bit of strain on others and so on, for memory's weak, and gratitude fades awful quick. Their lot's hard to bear if they have keen feelings; and that no

doubt is why Nature blunts their feelings and dulls their wits, and hides from them the sad truth about themselves. I expect this sounds brutal to you. But to realise it makes a man far more tender to the old really. They're so helpless, and their fame's all forgot. To mark old, old people in poor homes, with a look of fear in their eyes before those who have got to see after them, is a very pitiful sight."

"To be rough with the old is as dreadful as being unkind to children," she said.

Their friendship and understanding advanced; their parity of opinions amused them both. Only upon one subject did they differ, and Rosa May quickly changed it, though to Nathan it seemed absurd that any topic upon which it was possible to exercise rational thought need be denied himself and his companion. She asked him what were his interests and amusements outside his business, and he told her. Then she wished that her father could do this or that, and so win a little more entertainment for his middle-age. Thereupon Pomfret asked her a question, and let the answer determine his future speech. Before all things he desired to know her attitude to himself in his social relations. If Mr. Witherden had mentioned the matter, he decided that there was no reason why he should not do so. If, on the other hand, Rosa May's father, as he suspected, had felt such a subject unmeet for his daughter's ear, then it was not for the farmer to broach it. He acted thus out of regard for Witherden, not the girl. Already he knew Rosa May sufficiently well to perceive that no subject he held inoffensive was likely to affront her.

"Did your father tell you about his talk with me after our luncheon?" he asked.

"Yes," she said. "At least, not about the talk, but about the subject."

"He has rather a different point of view from country people. It's education, perhaps."

"I don't think so," she said. "It's a sort of frost-bound tradition. Amusing in a way—yet some people admire it

in him. They say father has got an 'old-world' mind, and rather seem to applaud him for it, as though it were a great distinction to be narrow-minded and behind the times and incapable of shifting your standpoint and go ahead with the rest of the world."

"Not education?"

"No, just habit, and contentment to believe what your father believed before you. Dad amuses me oftener than he vexes me; because what he thinks, or what he does not think, doesn't really matter in the least. But in your case——"

She broke off.

"Perhaps you'd rather not talk of it?" he asked. "Of course it interests me deeply. I'd always realised very keenly the general principle, that a man in my position was handicapped by the law of the land; but, by good luck, no doubt, I never realised that he might be handicapped by the opinion of his fellow-creatures."

"I should think not!" answered Rosa May. "The people who would be prejudiced against a man by an accident of his birth must be born fools. Father only makes me angry about once in a blue moon, and the last time he did was when he moaned about the 'unfortunate complexities' of your family history. That was the idiotic way he put it."

"He recognized them?"

"He did: that's what annoyed me. If nobody recognized them, they wouldn't exist. And no sane person would recognize them. And what mad people think doesn't signify."

"At that rate [the unfortunate complexities don't exist?"

"Of course they don't. Why should a silly law override facts? Because the law said you were not the head of the Crowns family when your father died, does that alter the fact? You are the head of the Crowns family in right and reason and justice; and I suppose everybody in the

world who knows anything about you, knows it. And because stupid laws deny it, what does that matter?"

He was silent. A wave of something akin to joy went through him. Rosa May had evidently reflected upon the subject, and the man delighted to think she had done so, for that argued interest.

"It was a great compliment to me that you thought about it twice," he said.

"I didn't think about it twice," she answered. "It doesn't need thought. It's a transparent, obvious sort of thing if you've got a shred of common sense. Society may make a million laws and regulations for its protection, because it's such a complicated, artificial, rubbishy, feeble affair that it wants protection everywhere, and without laws it couldn't exist; but it can't alter facts with its laws; and if a law does a gross injustice to innocent people, it must be a brutal law; and the men who are strong enough to repeal it and won't are mean cowards."

"You ought to talk to Mr. Fuggles," declared Nathan. "That's just what he says."

"Who could say anything else? Father can't possibly stand for many people. Take Mr. Crowns himself. Doesn't he know it? Didn't he tell me that you were a thousand times keener about the Crowns race, and a thousand times more jealous for it, than he is? Of course you are. Because you are the head of the family."

"Nick's keen enough, only he pretends he isn't. A splendid chap is Nick. He cuts a fine figure, and he has the art to win everybody. I don't believe that man has an enemy. He couldn't have. What does it matter, after all, if people understand us? Some might say that I was fortunate, you know."

"How fortunate?"

"To have the privileges of being a Crowns and yet escape the anxiety of being head of the family."

"Do you escape it?" she asked.

Thoughtlessly he had let himself into this trap, and

never supposed that she would question his last assertion. For a moment he hesitated, and Rosa May laughed.

"You'll tell me to mind my own business pretty soon, I expect," she said. "But, somehow, it seems so natural to say anything I choose to you. Because you're Jenny's brother, I expect, and so like Jenny in a lot of ways."

"Now I know why you ask such clever questions. But Jenny's too fond of making me a hero."

"Not at all. Nobody's a hero to his sister. But she knows that Mr. Crowns is a hero to you, so a brother can be a hero to his brother evidently."

"And isn't he a very good hero to have? Wouldn't you say it was a privilege to have a brother like Nick?"

"Yes, I would," she admitted. "He's got such a kind heart and generous nature. Women are bound to like him, whether they want to or not."

They united in praising Nicholas. Then Rosa May fell silent for a time.

"This is a beautiful place," she declared suddenly, "and I shall often come here. In autumn it must be glorious. When I see places like this, I wish I could paint pictures; but in some ways you escape a lot by not being able to do things like that. I knew a girl who painted pictures, and the better she painted the more disheartened she got. Then at last she painted just well enough to stop painting altogether."

"You'll always have Mill Pool close to you, so you needn't bother about pictures of it."

"And now I must go home to give father his tea," she said.

So they departed, and spoke but little on the way back to Tenterden.

Rosa May took an almost tender farewell of Nathan.

"I've loved it," she told him, "and I thank you a thousand times for showing it to me."

"And thank you gratefully for coming, I'm sure. It's been a rare pleasure to me."

Then he left her, and started for home in a dream. Half-way to Bugle he felt a longing to return to the Mill Pool, while still the aura of Rosa May hung about it. So he went back and sat just where they had sat together, and smoked another pipe, and watched the sun dip over the low hills, the shadows lengthen upon the water, and the white and yellow lilies close for sleep. He was melancholy and yet full of gentle happiness. But there is only one condition of human emotion under which a man may be happy and sad at once. Pomfret knew now that he loved Rosa May, and he was almost overwhelmed with the discovery.

He retraced her every word and found no flaw in her thoughts. Then he imaged her to the nails on her fingers. Then he frowned down on his own massive person, and regarded himself and his attire with extreme disfavour. In his mind was an acute regret. It dominated all his kindly thoughts, his desires to bring unutterable joys and blessings to this woman, his hunger and thirst to fill her life with everything that might be most precious to her. He found himself wishing, above everything, and before everything, that he had put on a smaller pair of boots. He had worn a big field pair, sizes larger than necessary, and he was positive that, while they sat together, she must have hated them and given him credit for elephantine feet—a circumstance doubtless in the highest degree distasteful to any such delicate spirit as Rosa May.

That she should care nothing for the accidents of his birth was only to be expected from one of her rare reasoning powers and sublime sense of justice; but that she should suppose his feet——

CHAPTER XV

THE MALE HOP

RUPERT SWADLING was still guiding his strike plough down the alleys of the hops. The machine drove one deep furrow as it went, and threw up a ridge of earth on either side. Thus good drainage was provided for the hills against winter rains. But now, the ground being very hard and dry, Rupert found progress slow. Reaching the end of an alley, he met a man waiting to speak to him, whereon, after his simple custom, and without preliminary salutation, Swadling voiced a thought that for the moment filled his mind.

"Hop-picking begins in a minute, but stake-pulling will be a terrible heavy job this year, for the ground's as if it was concrete."

"So it will, Rupert. Where's my brother? They told me at the house he was in the gardens. Haven't seen him for ten days."

"He's not in the gardens," answered the labourer; "he's in Tenterden, where he mostly is nowadays."

"Getting his people together for the picking?"

Rupert hesitated. There was a rumour abroad, and he knew from Johnny Hook that the master of Hill Crest had fallen in love with a Tenterden girl. But Mr. Swadling was nothing if not discreet, and in any case he could not speak of such a matter to Nathan Pomfret.

"It would be about the picking, no doubt," he answered.

"There'll be the usual hundred or so come to us."

"If you see Mr. Crowns, tell him I want him. I shall be home this evening."

"He shall hear of it," promised Rupert, and then on his

return journey to Hill Crest, Pomfret met his mother. She was walking out to look at the hops, and welcomed him gladly.

They went together, but their conversation proved interesting, and Mrs. Crowns stood still.

"I can't talk and walk," she said—"never could. If a subject is deep, I've got to sit to it."

He took off his coat and spread it on the hedge for her. Then he gave her a hand and helped her to sit down.

"I do believe you're putting on weight too fast, mother. If you were spryer it would be better for you."

She fanned herself.

"I shall take more exercise when the weather cools down a bit," she told him.

Opposite their shady resting-place a male hop grew, and it happened that a pole of silver birch supported it and enhanced its beauty. The plant was mature and seemed to spring with masculine vigour, twining stout spirals round the pole, almost hiding it with drooping leaves, and throwing lateral branches generously at every turn. It had climbed to the summit, then found a string, and from aloft showered down its pale sprays of inflorescence, fine as rain. The sparkling mist of tiny flowers opened in clusters in every node of the branches and finished each with a joyous spray. Up into the sun towered the great hop, and its pendant bloom tresses sparkled almost golden against the green; while on every hand, lovingly, shyly along the ropes came arms of the fruit-bearing hop-bines stretching to their lord.

"Nicholas always puts me in mind of those gay sterile things," said Mrs. Crowns. "And I do believe the girls would creep to your brother like the hops creep to that gay chap if they dared."

"It's nature."

"But there's better things in nature."

"Plenty of better things in his. It's no fault in a man to be fond of the girls."

"A very wonderful thing has happened, I believe," she answered. "And I'm inclined to hope a very good thing. You, with eyes and hands turned to your work, never find time to look round after the girls."

Nathan smiled.

"I wonder. Funny you should speak on that. But you go on, and then I'll tell you something after you've done."

"It's Nick, and if you mean you're going to tell me something about him, you can be sure I know it already. A good thing is going to fall out for him, as I believe. And trust a mother to see any good coming in sight for her son! I'm lightning quick where you and Nick are the matter—slow though I may be in other things, and too fat, as you say."

"I never said so, my old dear."

"Well—Nicholas. You know we've talked about him, and wearied our brains planning for him, and wished we could get a pinch of sense into him."

"I never did. I never doubted his sense. I always told you he was made of sense."

"But how could I believe that in face of all the silly things he's done?"

"Youth and high spirits and good health. There's nothing leads a chap into mischief like being splendidly well and full of beans all the time."

"It didn't lead you into mischief."

"I'm a dull dog beside Nick—haven't got his ideas and imagination and need of friends and power to shine. To please people so easily as he does is a temptation in itself. It must be wonderful to win people with a word or a nod."

"Well, I'd like to share your good opinion. He may win people, and he may please 'em, but he don't listen to 'em. There's only one man alive he'll hear sense from, and that's you."

"If my feeling for him could make me clever, then I should be clever," declared Nathan. "He knows very

well I'm not; but all the same I don't think he'd do anything really big without asking my advice and yours."

"Now we're coming to it then," she answered. "You understand him pretty well, and he owes more to you than he knows—far more. You've been a rare brother to him. But just of late I'm almost inclined to agree with you, that he's not without sense after all. As you say, when it comes to a really big thing, he'll generally go to you for advice, and that being so, I almost thought he might have gone lately."

"No. He's only been for money lately. Money's nothing between us."

"Good Lord! no—I know that. But—and yet—he wouldn't perhaps in such a matter. In such a nice thing as I'm thinking about, he certainly wouldn't come to you, or any man. And perhaps no woman either. A man lets out such things afterwards, not before. In a word, Nat, you know how we've thought of a wife for him, and how we've wished it, yet dreaded it."

"I never dreaded it. You've always said he'd go and marry some stupid, tow-haired doll with eyes like blue saucers and a voice like a bird's, and nothing behind 'em but a silly, empty-headed girl."

"Yes, I did. And you never would have it, but vowed he'd got the sense to know a toy was one thing and a wife another."

"And still I say it. When he thinks on a wife, she won't be that sort of woman."

"Right!" declared Mrs. Crowns. "He is thinking on a wife, and of all others ever I came across she's the one I'd myself have chosen."

Nathan whistled. As yet he did not suspect.

"That's why I've seen nothing of the man for the last fortnight. If you're pleased, then I'm pleased."

"It's almost too good to be true, in my opinion," answered Georgina. "Such things simply don't happen. And yet it has happened. He's in love with the most

sensible young creature I've met for a month of Sundays—Jenny's friend, that Rosa May Witherden. I do feel as if a great weight was off my shoulders, for it means such a lot. Have you seen anything of her? Have you spoke with her? If not I'd be very wishful for you to do so. I may be mistaken, yet I know I'm not. But I'd like your opinion. Just sound her, ask her and her father over to Bugle. Talk to her on serious subjects. She's all for fun and all that; yet touch a serious subject and she won't shirk it. She's thought and felt. There's a lot of ballast in her. The man that takes her won't want to be running about. I believe that it would be the best day's work that could ever happen for us, and for Nick as the head of the family—a proper godsend in fact, and likely to save me and you many a care and fret in days to come."

The length of her speech had given Pomfret time to steady himself.

"I take credit to myself for Nick," she went on. "I've been patient, and I've been wise where he was concerned, and I don't care who hears me say so. And well and wonderfully you've helped me. His father couldn't have done more. In truth his father couldn't have done so much as you, for his nature wasn't so well suited to the work. You never gave me a care, Nathan, and never a brother had a better elder brother."

Still he said nothing. His mind was revolving about itself, and he hardly heard the latter remarks of Mrs. Crowns.

"For the sake of the family I'll beg you to help it on," she pleaded. "I do think for once the future's about as clear as mortal creatures can ever expect to see it."

At last he found his tongue.

"This is a startler," he said; "and no doubt, if I hadn't been a good deal driven by my own affairs, I should have marked it. And what about the other side? What about Miss Witherden's view of Nick?"

"For that I've gone to Jenny, because a girl will speak

freer about a man than his mother. Rosa May's very friendly disposed to Nicholas. In fact quite as friendly disposed as one could expect in the short space of time that's passed since first she knew him."

"Great news, certainly—a startler in fact," he repeated. His mother felt impatient.

"Can't you speak to the point then? It's little better than stupid to keep saying it's a 'startler.' Of course it's a startler. Such things always are when they come. The point is whether you don't think, same as I do, that it would be a godsend for Nicholas, and therefore a thing we ought to leave no stone unturned to bring about if we can."

"They'll do what they must, I suppose."

Mrs. Crowns regarded her son with something akin to suspicion.

"Leave it then, since you're not inclined to speak about it. Maybe you haven't got the imagination yet to know what a difference love and marriage makes to a man's prospects and career. It takes a married man's experience to measure it, and to know the powers for good, or ill, a wife can bring to bear on her husband. You'll feel it yourself some day. And, meantime, you can take my word for it and be a little keener to help me and Nick than you appear to be. No doubt, because I'm so hot on the subject, you seem—only seem—to be cold. Of course I know there's nothing on God's earth you better want than the welfare of your brother; and nothing on earth you've took more trouble to further all your life, for that matter."

"Be sure of that, mother."

"And what was your business? You'd got something to say. Only I was that full I had to speak first. What was it? But if nothing about Nicholas, then nothing to the point just now. I never did find my mind so full of one question before."

"It was nothing to the point," he answered. "At least in so far as Nick's concerned; and you naturally feel he's everything for the minute."

She put her hand on the man's arm.

"You're my firstborn, and properly precious to me," she said; "and nothing you might have to tell me about yourself would fail to hold me. Your crops and your cattle, your good and your bad—everything to do with you, Nat, is very close to me. But 'tis the price that such steady, solid chaps as you must pay for their level minds and unchanging outlook, that they don't play on a mother's heartstrings like the more wayward sort. 'Tis the flower that's given him the most trouble to raise that the gardener makes most fuss about; and difficult children, just for their difficulty, command more care, and so win more interest and love even, than the sort that never want a thought or breed a pang, and move on their way with patience and self-control."

They rose, and still, to Georgina's surprise, her son had little to say upon the subject. He shared her hopes that Nicholas might prosper, but he seemed to fall far short of his usual quick apprehension. His mother did not again exhibit impatience, but she felt it. She could guess at no possible reason for Nathan's apparent lethargy of mind before this great and splendid promise for Nicholas.

"There's another point," she said, "and that's the dark side of this. Perhaps you're thinking of that, and so don't feel so excited as I do. Of course she may not care for him. It's just in the bounds of possibility; and if she threw him over, we all know he'd be a handful for a bit then. Is that why you're so quiet? Don't you think she likes him? If so, she's different from most other girls."

"She is different from most other girls, I believe," he answered. "Different, I mean, in the quality of sense. But that's not to say anything about her feeling for Nicholas, of course. She may care greatly for him."

"Has she ever mentioned him to you?"

"Yes, in a very friendly spirit."

"Then be more hopeful," said Mrs. Crowns. "You're

not lacking in hope as a rule, and if you can feel it for yourself, you ought to feel it for me. My heart's deep in this. Everything points to it. You know how cool and cautious I am most times, and never ready to believe a good thing till it's happened; but for once I'm fairly taken out of myself. I believe that a match between Nicholas and that girl would be a tower of strength for him in the future, and all for the honour of the Crowns race. That's a point very near to your wishes, anyway. Why, feeling as you do to Nick, I should have thought when I told you I believed this fine thing was going to happen, you'd have jumped for joy, Nat!"

"And every right to think so," he said.

They parted then, and the man, profoundly moved, went on his way. As for his mother, she did not comprehend. It seemed as though she had poured out every ray of her intelligence upon the future salvation of her younger son, and so left her mind stupid in respect of any lesser interest. It was a curious failure of perception in such a clever woman; but for the moment she proved quite unable to see the situation from any other standpoint than the welfare of Nicholas; and she could not guess that another, least of all Nathan, might survey the situation at a different angle. For if any man on earth desired the prosperity of Nicholas and his race, that man was his brother.

Mrs. Crowns went away mildly aggrieved by Pomfret's failure to respond, but that it arose from anything of consequence, that he was not really at one with her, heart and soul, she did not dream. She explained it to herself, as she thought quite philosophically, and troubled no more about it.

"Of course he can't feel as I feel," she considered; "he does all a brother can, and far, far more than most brothers would; and when this comes home to him, he'll help with all his wits; but at best one can't ask him to feel all I do about it. A widow's son is her first care and business, but a man's brother is not his first care and business, and we've no right to demand he should be."

Meantime Nathan took his thoughts homeward, and his spirit rebelled. The situation exasperated him beyond measure, for on the surface it was merely commonplace, if not ridiculous, while beneath the surface it threatened to become tragical. He wished for a moment that he had spoken to his mother; yet was glad he had not.

He felt irritated in a manner much out of the common, and what irritated was not the great problem now looming in his life, but the hateful, stupid, mean complication it involved. He was not cast down or depressed; he was not frightened at the battle ahead of him, and he did not dread the possibility of defeat. To fight and lose would be all in the day's work; but the maddening doubt was whether he could fight—whether he was justified in fighting, or whether, instead, it would be his duty to run away without fighting.

His present mood continued one of hearty exasperation at the situation. It appeared to him impossible, stuffy, asphyxiating. Something must be done instantly to clear the air and let his mother and brother know that he loved Rosa May. Yet, so contrary to every instinct of the man was it to confess this great fact at this stage of the romance, that he doubted the possibility of doing so. From that conviction he presently arrived at a decision to speak; and then, when he recollected his mother's view, that through Rosa May, and only through her, salvation might come to Nicholas, the thought of confession was again clouded.

Upon the whole, the sense of his mind proved masculine and rational to the extent that he judged himself free in honour and conscience to follow his own desires; yet how to do so without speaking was the problem. In his judgment the time was still far distant when he might reasonably offer his hand to Rosa May, and there was also a cloud of lesser questions rising over the horizon and becoming greater as it drew near. Apart from the good of Nicholas, he began to consider the good of Rosa May.

And here, indeed, he soon landed himself in deeper difficulties.

He had so little to offer. His brother had so much.

From burning discomfort, and through mental deserts, arid and unfertile, Nathan returned to himself and blamed himself for such an ebullition of poor spirit. Not by vain regrets or ill temper did the way lie out of this.

That night Nicholas came to see him, and asked for some more money till the hops were sent to market. He was friendly and cheerful, but said nothing about the Witherdens; and Nathan, who had determined to confess to Nicholas, should Nicholas confess to him, was glad to escape the immediate necessity.

Some return to peace calmed him before he slept. He argued that Nick was keeping his own counsel, as any man would at such a delicate time. He might therefore do the like, and the fact that, thanks to their mother, he knew Nicholas was engaged in the same operation as himself, should not, he determined, influence him in any way. That would be fair and square. In this matter he must treat his brother precisely as he must treat any other rival. This satisfied him, but only for a moment. Inasmuch as he knew Nick was his rival, while Nick was ignorant that he had a rival, Nathan enjoyed an advantage. Therefore he decided that, in fairness and honour, Nick must be told. Then each would know where he stood.

"For that matter, there may be a dozen other men who want to wed her," reflected the master of Bugle; "but be that as it will, all shall be fair fighting between me and Nick."

He decided finally that he could have little chance against his brother, and his lack of self-assertion made him melancholy again.

He fogged his mind very thoroughly before he slept, and, from a phase of determination and fixed purpose, drifted back into uncertainties and doubts and a shadow of inclination towards sacrifice. As his brain grew weary, the

fraternal plea gained upon him, till it almost frightened him. He became unconscious at last, and when he woke again refreshed the next morning, he discovered an increased virility and will to fight for his own hand and his own good. He was glad to feel it.

CHAPTER XVI

THE PENNY ROMANCE

JOHNNY HOOK moved upon a low moral and mental plane. He was attracted by Nina Dunk and wanted her for a wife; but the attraction was stimulated by a hope that Nina would be worth marrying. He had heard talk concerning her uncle and aunt, and found the eccentricities of Sarah Dunk explained in a very interesting manner. She was said to be a miser, and to live penuriously from choice, not necessity. Indeed, she and William Dunk were thought to possess a fortune; and since Nina was their next-of-kin, the secret hoard intact must certainly come to her before very long. Now that the old man was dead, Sarah alone stood between her niece and the money.

Mr. Hook, however, soon found out that Nina knew nothing about this nest-egg, and he took care not to tell her. She was a simple, good-hearted girl, and overwhelmingly in love with him. That such a showy youth, so gallant withal, and so well thought upon by Nicholas Crowns, should have considered her for a moment, impressed Nina not a little. She had no conceit of herself, and life with her aunt, who disliked the young to be assertive, had moulded her to somewhat unusual modesty and lack of assurance. Not, indeed, until a fateful day, when Johnny kissed her in the hop-gardens, and begged her to be his wife, had Nina ever seriously considered herself as a personable woman with sufficient mental and physical endowments to challenge a man. That Henry Honeysett thought well of her she knew, and that had endeared him to her. He indeed first set her thinking, and, but for Johnny, Mr. Honeysett had made an easy conquest; for

at this stage in her career, Nina was quite prepared to love anybody with all her heart who might condescend to love her. The mere fact that a man should find her lovable was enough to make him adorable. It seemed to her that anybody who could lose his heart to her trivial person and modest intelligence, might well demand the fullest return that she was capable of giving.

Henry, indeed, was the first to awake this sentiment, but his devout love-making faded to the merest shadow in Nina's inexperienced opinion, before the finer fires and fervour of Mr. Hook. Johnny kissed her and put his arms round her—things that Henry had never dared to do—and though this embrace did not happen until after a fortnight of serious courting, Nina still felt it spoke of a deeper passion and nobler ardour than Mr. Honeysett had exhibited during a gradual approach of eight weeks. She did not say "yes" for three further days, and then she promised to wed Johnny.

From the moment that her betrothal was announced, Nina endured the extremity of misery at home, and no little uneasiness abroad. Her aunt declined either to recognize Mr. Hook as a lover, or receive him as a guest. She refused to entertain the idea of him as a nephew, and plagued Nina day and night to change her mind; while, as if that were not sufficient to make the path of love uneasy, her acquaintance, some out of good nature and some out of bad, were able to relate certain incidents from Johnny's past which reflected little credit upon him. He had been engaged on two previous occasions, and though one daughter of well-to-do parents, inspired thereto by still earlier anecdotes from Johnny's career, had jilted him, a second girl herself had endured this ignominy under the most painful possible circumstances.

Taxed with these disclosures he admitted them, but justified them. He had, he said, withheld them from Nina's ears on the highest motives. He had been sinned against rather than sinning, and in the matter of a certain

paternity order, most solemnly called his Maker to witness that he was the victim of a cowardly and calculated plot. Never in his life would he, or could he, have done such a thing, and that the girl's word had been believed before his own, had shattered Johnny's former trust in the law, and in the reason and justice of his fellow-men.

"But the baby's got red hair," sobbed Nina.

"What if it has?" he answered fiercely. "Can't no red-haired baby be born in Kent but I'm the father?"

"I never called your hair red, for that matter," she mumbled. "It's just bright—that's all."

"And another thing," explained Johnny. "It's very well known that children take after their grandfathers, not their fathers. My father was brown as a bear, so there you are—proof positive."

This fact in natural history had been accepted by Nina, and when once assured that Mr. Hook was the victim of circumstances and cunning intrigue, she loved him better than ever. But the case still appeared hopeless, for Sarah Dunk belonged to those who mistrusted Johnny, and she never wearied in adverse criticism. Meantime her former support of Henry Honeysett also waned, for Henry had so far refused to play the man and take any active steps of aggression against his rival.

Then Nina, inspired thereto by a romance she had bought at Tenterden for the sum of one penny, made a picturesque suggestion.

"It's like this," she said to her lover: "aunt never will abide you while there's a way out. So long as I'm only engaged, she'll raise heaven and earth to break it off, for an engagement, though sacred to you and me, is nothing to her. Very like if she'd been engaged, or even kept company, she might feel different; but so it is with her. She even pretends we're not engaged, and that it's all nonsense and silly talk. But suppose some fine morning she woke up to find me gone and just a letter on the kitchen table to say I was off to be married? And then, suppose

I come back a married woman? She's done then. And after all, Johnny, when you come to the bottom of it, though she's always been a good friend to me and so on, yet there's no reason why we should mess up our lives and keep apart to suit Aunt Sarah. There's nothing to her—no money or anything of that. So, because she's unreasonable, and takes a very wrongful view of you, owing to her mind being poisoned, that's no good reason why we should yield to her for evermore."

He considered.

"We know she's got nothing to leave, of course, except all that rubbish she's made herself, fit for a bonfire, and no more; but suppose, for the sake of argument, she had a few pounds for you when she goes, d'you think you'd lose it if you took me?"

"No," declared Nina. "Certainly I should not. For why? There's nobody else to leave her sticks to, and though an obstinate creature, she's not bad-hearted; and after we are married and she lived to see it was a success—then—then she'd come round. That's how it always happens. People may storm if they're crossed, but at the bottom of their hearts they respect bravery. She'd very soon see she was mistook in you, and I'm sure it would show what we are to each other and all that. And we'd cut a much more dashing figure in the public eye if we did such a thing."

"It's just a feat I might do, certainly. It's a very romantic idea, though I couldn't make a home for you for the minute."

"I wouldn't come if you could," she answered. "That would be the romantic part. Though I'm your lawful wife, still I stop on with Aunt Sarah, just for affection; and you needn't say you couldn't make a home. It would sound much finer if you said you could, only you weren't going to, for the sake of my aunt, so as I shouldn't be took from her."

He nodded.

"We just get hitched up and then go on as if nothing had happened?"

"Exactly so," said Nina. "It's a thing of every day in books, if not in real life. It's like a play in a theatre, you might say. We slip off by night, and presently we come back married, and aunt weeps a bit, but she soon relents, and asks you to tea, or what not; and then she finds out the truth about you, and in less than no time you're like a son to her."

"Then, after a bit, when my money's raised, which Nick Crowns would do if I was married, for he thinks a lot of me—after a bit, I take a tidy house, in St. Michaels for choice, and your old woman comes to live with us, and we close her eyes."

"What could be better? To think how far-sighted you are!"

From that hour Johnny weighed the problem, and it appealed to him. Here was something out of the common, something challenging, something calculated to show the people that the spirit of old romance had not died out of Kent with the stage-coaches. He liked the idea, and if only he had felt sure of Miss Dunk, he would have agreed without further consideration. Foggy notions the reverse of romantic and more in keeping with his previous achievements also passed through his mind. He considered the possibility of a mock marriage, so that if the worst happened and Miss Dunk proved unshakeable, he might escape; but there were two objections to this course: he was fairly fond of Nina and hesitated to treat her ill, and he was doubtful of the procedure of a sham ceremony and of the punishment, if any, that existed for the offender in such cases. The latter consideration carried more weight, and his vanity combined to assist the decision in Nina's favour. He determined, a fortnight before hop-picking, to marry Nina secretly, and a week before the business of hop harvest he set out to do so.

They made elaborate plans largely built on Nina's

penny novel. It might have been written for them. At midnight on a certain day Johnny was to meet Nina in the hop-garden, and she fixed the identical spot where first he had kissed her.

"It's poetry," said Johnny, "and one place is as good as another, no doubt."

Then together they would walk to Tenterden, where a man in the secret would have a trap waiting for them. Thence they were going to drive to Paddock Wood and catch an early morning train for London. Having married at a registrar's, which, according to the penny romance, was a thing of a moment, they proposed to take a room in a hotel, enjoy a honeymoon of two days' duration, and then return home—Johnny to Hill Crest, and Nina to her aunt at the Peak.

"It's all so simple and fine," said Nina.

"Truth is stranger than fiction, and people will point to us to prove it," prophesied Mr. Hook.

He took his measures, packed his wedding raiment in an old portmanteau given to him by Nicholas Crowns, let it be understood that he was starting on his two days' holiday the following morning, and secretly planned to meet Nina in the hops at midnight.

He moved about as a superior being until the time came. He looked at Rupert Swadling, at old Eli Samson, who was making ready the oast, and at other inferior men; and he felt that a gulf yawned between him and their commonplace souls. The true Johnny Hook was about to be revealed, and he believed that his master would be proud of him; while the women would be dazzled and the men jealous. He passed Henry Honeysett on the very night before his adventure. He and Henry had not spoken since his engagement, but at this moment, knowing what he knew, Mr. Hook could not forbear a word.

"Good evening, neighbour," he said in a most majestic tone of voice; but little guessed how near was Mr. Honeysett to a grim and sanguinary answer.

"I may tell you this, John Hook, I'm coming to it!" he replied; but since Johnny was ignorant of the matters in Henry's mind, or of what he was coming to, the significance of the words missed him.

"Coming to what, Henry? Drink?" he asked.

But Mr. Honeysett disdained reply.

Then drew in the summer eve, so great with fate for Nina. She had her letter written—the letter to explode her news when she was far away. After tea she declared that she had a headache and would go early to bed.

"I'm off to Biddenden myself," said Sarah, for a pair of them long stockings for my arms. Hop-picking begins four days hence—don't you forget that."

She and her niece were of the company who would soon be working at Hill Crest.

"I'll be asleep when you come back, so no call to wake me up," said Nina.

Matters thus fell out conveniently, and she had the cottage to herself for her packing. She was taking her best Sunday frock and a few trinkets and a new nightgown. On the little nightgown she had sewn four blue bows. Once again she read the letter destined for her aunt. Johnny had also read it and praised it highly. The girl in the penny novel was largely to be thanked for it; but this Mr. Hook did not know, and Nina's borrowed plumes rather surprised him.

Thus she had written:—

"MY DEAR AUNT SARAH,

"I am about to take a step that will much surprise you, and when you are reading this communication I shall be far away. It has been a great grief to me that you could not see Mr. Hook with my eyes and have let the jealous and prejudiced views of others influence your usual wise judgment against his character; but alas! so it is. You fail to see the pride and high disposition of my future husband; but nevertheless, soon after these words reach you, I shall be his bride.

"I feel, my dear Aunt Sarah, that no other course lies

open to us, and I am very positive that when we are married, God will throw light into your mind about my husband, as he will then be, so that you may see John in his true colours. It is only envy that makes people utter base falsehoods about him, for he is a man of the highest principles, and it is his proud nature and dignified way that makes commoner kind of men jealous. And such a man as Mr. Nicholas Crowns knows this and thinks well of him. But it is well known that a prophet is without honour in his own house.

"We are going to be married and live it down, but not together. Mr. Hook will not *hear* of my leaving you at present. He is most considerate for your comfort, and still hopes that after time's mellowing hand has passed over us all, that you will live to see him as he is, without fear, and without reproach.

"We are going to be married before the registrar in London, and after a day or two of blissful union entirely dead to the world, we are going to take up life again where we left it, and each face the duties and stern demands of reality. I shall come back to you, my dear Aunt Sarah, and be your dutiful niece as usual and I hope, share your bin in the hop-picking as I always do. And my husband, for he will be my husband then, will go back to his work also just as if nothing had happened.

"He has got two days' holiday, and I hope, dear and kind Aunt, that you will live to see that true love casteth out fear, and that those that God hath joined together must be in no wise cast asunder.

"I shall bring you a little gift from London, and I hope you will accept it. There was no other way than this, and I have not taken such a grave step without going many times on my knees to my Redeemer. And He has thrown a clear light upon it all, and filled my heart with a sure feeling that in course of time you will see what Mr. Hook really is, and how shameful he has been misunderstood for jealousy by his inferiors. I could say much more, dear Aunt Sarah, but I will not detain you longer.

"I do not like to think of you finding the fire not lighted to-morrow morning, but it is only for once in a way, and I shall very soon be home again.

"I am, your dutiful and affectionate niece,

"NINA DUNK, for the last time, being already as good as NINA HOOK."

When Miss Dunk returned from Biddenden she came full of news, and hoped that Nina would be awake to hear it; but the girl was apparently sleeping soundly; therefore Sarah kept her information for the following day and herself retired. She was excited, however, and full of a considerable triumph. She had not slumbered half an hour when Nina rose, dressed, and departed stealthily. Upon the kitchen table the girl left her letter, and with her she carried a big carpet bag. It was rather heavy for her.

In the penny romance there had been a pursuer, and the lovers only escaped him after some very heroic and exceptional conduct; but Nina felt rather glad there could be no pursuer to-night. She stole through the darkness, and saw it broken and warmed by a rising moon. A brief redness touched the dew; then, sailing aloft, the moon turned to silver. The churn-owl purred interminably from his place in the clearing, and once the moth-like body of him passed her close, as he sped away to throb again far off. The dew glittered, and little glow-worms shed sparks of liquid green light, that illuminated the wayside grass wherein they moved. The wan magic of the moment touched Nina's heart almost to tears. Purest romance seemed to live and breathe under the silvery gloom. She was early, and did not immediately enter the darkness of the hop-gardens, but dropped her carpet bag, sat at the cross-roads outside on a heap of road metal and watched the glow-worms glimmer. A sound alarmed her, and she retreated to the hedge. But it was only an old horse, who had escaped from some meadow, and was wandering along through the night, as horses will.

Tenterden's distant bell struck the half-hour, and Nina, guessing that her lover might also come too soon, crept to the tryst. It was beside the male hop at the edge of the garden. The silver-pole that supported it flashed brightly in the moonlight, and towered aloft like a ghost in a black and tattered shroud. It seemed to stare at her, as though it knew her not; but she revived a sunlit memory

of it—the picture that chimed with her happiest moment on earth and the glory of Johnny's first kiss. She cuddled into the hedge, where it was very dark, and strained her ears for the approaching footfall. Patter of feet did presently sound, but they were not human. There wandered through the dreaming alleys a flock of lambs that ought to have been asleep long ago. But they loved to browse on the leaves of the hops, and since they could do no harm now, were permitted in the gardens. Silently they plucked and nibbled. Then they moved away; the sounds of them faded and great silence reigned. The hour approached midnight, and Nina walked a little distance to where, very dim and shadowy on its knoll, stood Hill Crest. All lights were out, and she could see nothing but the straggling fir-trees and the two mighty crows, perched together against the stars. The oasts almost resembled things that lived, and it had hardly surprised the watcher to see the giants move off through the moony night together.

At twelve o'clock she was back again beside the male hop waiting and listening. But she only heard the bells of Tenterden and the midnight tune they played. So peaceful was the air that every note of their familiar melody came to her ears.

And now, still in the spirit of penny romance, we must seriously ask ourselves, "Where was Johnny Hook?" He had indeed been in the hop-garden, but was there no longer, for fate had juggled with Johnny and put upon him an ordeal much beyond his virtue to survive with distinction.

In a word, circumstances arose at the last moment that quite determined him on no account to wed with Nina. The decision was only inspired three hours before his midnight appointment, and only reached an hour before he should have been at the tryst. To go to her and tell her bluntly that he had changed his mind, demanded a moral courage to which Johnny could not lay claim. He did not intend to see her that night, and yet, when the inevitable moment of explanation came a few days hence, he felt it

would, of course, be necessary to explain his non-arrival. Even he felt that it was hard upon Nina to cool her heels in the hop-garden for an indefinite length of time and suffer needlessly into the bargain. Her griefs, however, did not so much weigh with him as the thought of his own credit, when explanations would have to be made.

There was plenty of time to hatch the ultimate lies; but little remained for the pressing, immediate falsehood. He decided at eleven o'clock that he would go into the hop-gardens and wait, but in a direction as far as possible from the trysting spot. He would then be in a position to tell her that he had mistaken the meeting-place, and had imagined the region of their first kiss lay in a very different direction. His actual expedition into the gardens signified nothing, so that it was well out of reach of Nina. The lie once planned, a more complete rascal would not have troubled further, since it mattered nothing, so far as Nina was concerned, whether he actually went into the hop-gardens or no. Yet such was the peculiar psychology of Mr. Hook that he actually crept forth, when Hill Crest slept, and sat in an exceedingly secluded corner on a fence for the space of half an hour. Had he been more cool, it is probable that he would not have observed so trivial a formality; but he acted thus, and it is a fact that he derived distinct mental consolation and support from so doing. He would now be able to tell the solemn truth to Nina; indeed, he began to believe himself in a sub-conscious fashion, before Tenterden chimes played in another day, and he returned to his room at Hill Crest quite heartened by this futile achievement. He felt confident, too, that there would be no difficulty in making Nina believe him, and he judged that upon this basis, he would be able to build a good and sufficient framework for subsequent conduct. There is nothing like dragging in Providence when we do anything out of the common, thought Mr. Hook. He would explain how he had returned from his lonely watch in the depth of disappointment and dismay;

how he had passed a sleepless night of torture, and how gradually out of his grief there had stolen upon him the conviction that Providence was at work to prove his engagement a profound mistake after all.

Fortified by these determinations, and conscious that, as far as he was concerned, Providence had in truth been very considerate, Mr. Hook went to his rest. He pictured Nina going home, and felt sorry for her tribulation, but contrasted with his own crushing experience of a few hours earlier, it loomed not particularly large. Only one thought caused him further uneasiness: it was that in all probability the girl might hear the real reasons for his change of mind before her opportunity arose to listen to his falsehoods. There was even a chance that she might already have done so. But he could only hope, had that happened, she declined to believe them. In any case he recognized the need for seeing her at a very early hour on the following day, and then he went to sleep.

Meantime his forlorn and outraged lover suffered very many cruel emotions and fearful alarms. Indeed, sorrow and fear alternated in her heart for an hour. She waited in increasing agony until the bells told one o'clock, and then she began to return to her home. She staggered along, dragging her bag. She was dazed, bewildered, mind-weary before this dreadful experience. After a frenzy of active thoughts, in which a thousand possibilities, each more dreadful than the last, tormented her, Nina sank finally into blank and stark indifference. Half-way to 'Peak' she changed her mind and struggled back to the male hop on its birch-pole. Again she waited, and again her mind awoke. She ranged through all the passions, until at last anger came to the rescue. Then she returned home, and the sinking moon shone on her set face. To her aunt's cottage she came; it seemed to her that she had been away for a century of time. She picked up her letter, made fast the door, listened a moment to Sarah's steady breathing, and then entered her own little room.

Everything seemed unreal except the tears that flowed till morning. Not until dawn had brightened and the birds were singing in the wood did she sleep; and she had barely escaped from her sufferings before small stones against the window awakened her, and she saw Johnny Hook in the garden.

Perceiving that he was alive and well, and actually smoking his pipe, she hated him with fiery hate, told him to be gone, and drew her blind again. He waited a little while, thinking she would relent, but she did not, and guessing very inaccurately at the reason for her conduct, he went away not ill pleased.

"That lets me out devilish well," thought Mr. Hook. "Now I can get off for my two days and nothing said."

CHAPTER XVII

AT THE "HYDRANGEAS"

NATHAN POMFRET kept an appointment with Mr. Fuggles. In his mind was waxing great unrest, and the man in him found itself opposed by difficulties which complicated the tremendous experience of being in love. He was bewildered, and instead of pursuing Rosa May and pouring into his paramount present interest every ounce of energy and wit; instead of abandoning all other thoughts and cares before this master challenge, he found himself hesitating and distracted. He was conscious that he stood unfairly handicapped by the situation, yet himself had created the handicap. It merely consisted in the knowledge that Nicholas also loved Rosa May, and was, therefore, only a hindrance if he allowed it to become so. Let him ignore it and his own proceedings need not be affected by it. But how could he forget what his mother had told him? How could he ignore her ambitions? How was it possible to deny that Rosa May would be a very perfect and sufficient wife for the head of the Crowns family? The man struggled to put these views in their proper perspective and exalt the lover in him above the brother, or the son; but for a moment chaos continued to reign in Nathan's mind, though his actions were not modified thereby. He saw Rosa May from time to time, and she was always ready and willing to plan a future meeting; but he ceased to speak to his family of her, and noticed that she, too, only mentioned Jenny. He thought that Rosa May had become less lively of late, but explained it as his own fault. With her he certainly found himself stupid, for he could no longer be quite natural. His knowledge came between

him and the words that sprang to his tongue. He varied emotionally, and was conscious that he puzzled her a little by appearing to be now hot, now cold. He had reached a point when his reason grew ashamed and his native character rebelled.

He could no longer face two ways, or permit himself to go in doubt before such a tremendous demand. Either he must moderate his friendship, renounce his hope and leave the way clear for Nicholas, or he must ignore the ambitions of his mother, and the desire of his brother, and fight for Rosa May with all his strength. He reminded himself for the thousandth time that he knew more about the situation than Nicholas. For Mrs. Crowns had explained that Nicholas was in love; but Nicholas had still to learn Nathan's secret. Pomfret wondered what his brother would do, if he did know it; and what his mother would do. He could not imagine, but felt sure they would be much embarrassed. The difficulty was how to let them know. It seemed reasonable to explain to his mother and let the fact reach Nicholas through her. He had arrived at no decision before he called on Mr. Fuggles, who greeted him with news.

"Not an hour ago," he said, "I despatched my great missive to your sister, Jenny. I have asked her to be my wife. I don't want your opinion, however, because you are ignorant of the data on which I take this step, and probably have not studied Jenny's character, as I have studied it during the last few years. I may be wrong, of course, in my conclusions; but that is for her to determine."

"Just so," answered Nathan. "It is for her to decide. Of course she values your good opinion; but I don't think she'll marry you. If she does, it will be for love, and no other reason. She wouldn't take you on any other grounds."

"That's what I fear," confessed Martin Fuggles frankly. "I'm not saying a word against true love, Nathan; but you must remember that many very admirable partnerships in

the marriage business are founded on other principles. I have stated the case impartially. I should make an amazingly good husband in some directions, but in others, I do not regard myself as adequate. I love Jenny, though I don't think she loves me, and if, as you say, love is the only criterion of marriage in her mind, then she won't come to me. On the other hand, if she considers that other human considerations may make as good a foundation for matrimony as love, if not far better—a thing specially to be put forward when there's a great difference in age—then she may come. She's so sensible that I've spoken very openly. You can't have perfection; and you can't have it both ways—nobody knows that better than Jenny."

"The point is this," answered Nathan. "Love may not be everything, and it's true enough that you can have a satisfactory marriage without it under certain conditions; but take this case. Jenny marries you and is happy with you and a rare good wife to you—respects you, admires your cleverness, and is honestly proud of being Mrs. Fuggles, as any woman might be. Then some younger man comes along and she falls in love with him. Not for wanton wickedness or anything like that; but it just happens. What then?"

"Then I should proceed with the utmost circumspection," answered Mr. Fuggles. "The whole disgusting and sordid side of these affairs depends entirely upon the husband. A rational man like myself must know perfectly well where he stands in such a case. I should invite Jenny's confidence. I should have nothing underhand, sneaking, or secret. I naturally did not mention the possibility of such a sequel in a letter offering marriage, because I am not supposed to know yet that Jenny cannot love me, or does not. But I have considered that side, and, once wedded to me, if Nature happened to come between us afterwards, I should bow to Nature, as I always have, and everything would be done decently and in order."

"Of course, with a girl like my sister, it's a million to one against any such thing happening," said Nathan.

"I believe so too. I should not go out of my way to court such an unfortunate termination to wedded life. You don't wait till my age for a failure. With Jenny there is small fear of such an irregular event; but we are all mortal and human, and the thing is to remember it. Anger and rage would cease to exist if we did remember it."

"We haven't all got your reason. You don't forget what it was to be young."

"I do not, and therefore few things annoy me, and nothing annoys me that can't be helped. To worry about the unhelpable is to waste good nervous energy."

"How's the campaign with the bishop going?"

"Badly. He's beginning to hedge already. I wanted to show you the next development. I told him, you know, that I thought public opinion, if it understood the case of the natural child, would cry out for England to be on all fours with other civilised nations, including Scotland, so that subsequent marriage should make such a one legitimate, and not leave him 'the child of none,' as he is at present. Then I got this——"

Mr. Fuggles broke off, went to his desk and produced a letter.

"I'll read it to you," he said, and did so.

"THE PALACE,
"MAIDSTONE.

"DEAR SIR,

"The Bishop bids me thank you cordially for your letter. He believes, however, that you are seriously mistaken in thinking that expert opinion—legal and otherwise—is universally in favour of an assimilation of the English to the Scottish law.

"The Bishop, indeed, is personally cognisant of a very strong opinion in the opposite direction entertained by those who have specially had to handle, in court and out of it, this nice problem.

"The Bishop, however, recognises that there are many

who think the Scottish system to be far better, and he will doubtless have future opportunities to re-open some of the discussions he has taken part in on the subject. Rest assured that he will not neglect them.

"I am,

"Yours faithfully,

"THOMAS FORTHERINGAY.

"(Chaplain)."

"He doesn't say what he thinks or feels himself."

"Not he," answered Mr. Fuggles; "but I wasn't going to leave it there. I answered that letter, and am waiting to hear again. This is my reply."

Mr. Fuggles read once more.

"THE HYDRANGEAS,

"TENTERDEN.

"DEAR SIR,

"I beg to thank you for your last. That there are reasons to convince any humanist why the natural child, born in England, should not be rendered legitimate by subsequent marriage of his parents I did not know. The question seems to me more one of actual justice to the innocent and powerless, than of possible legal expediency for his parents, or other people. I thought it was a case where everybody's business is nobody's business, so a busy world had let slip an opportunity to right a wrong, from preoccupation rather than intent.

"The Church has called so stoutly for this reform that I did not know the Bishop of Maidstone attached the least value to any argument against it, otherwise I should not have ventured to occupy a moment of his valuable time.

"Expert opinion—legal and otherwise"—may, as you say, be disposed to leave the natural child in his present forlorn position; but I venture to believe that public opinion, both rational and Christian, needs only to be challenged to speak with no uncertain voice.

"I am, with compliments,

"Yours faithfully,

"MARTIN FUGGLES.

"TO THE REV. THOMAS FORTHERINGAY,

"THE PALACE,

"MAIDSTONE."

"Has he answered that?"

"Not yet; but he will. At least he should do so," declared Mr. Fuggles. "I feel, however, the bishop isn't interested. It's the Anglo-Saxon blood beginning to tell. I have other irons in the fire, however. The world was never so full of things crying out to be altered."

Nathan considered.

"It's a difficult world," he admitted. "I've always envied you, Martin, because you stand outside and look on. If you marry Jenny, then you'll plunge in yourself. I thought, somehow, that I should be like you—isolated."

"Never," answered the other. "I'm alone in the world, with none to sigh over, or ache for; but you've got your family. Seldom was a man more keen and jealous for his own than you are. And that, seeing how it stands, and that you are outside them, as it were—one of them and yet not one of them—is very interesting. It shows how blood is thicker than water, and stronger than the letter of the law."

Mr. Fuggles thus unconsciously touched the very matter in the other's mind.

"Patriotism begins at home with me," confessed Pomfret. "Else, I suppose, I shouldn't be in a good bit of difficulty now. Do you reckon we ought to feel the man's nothing, the race everything?"

"Depends on the man. He's the measure of his race, of course. There's a natural instinct towards country in most educated minds, though not in all. You've got the family instinct pressed down and running over. And that's what's so curious in you, being as you are. But you should not let it go beyond reason. The thing is to rationalise the natural instincts. That won't make them unnatural, or lessen their value, but you must master them and not let them master you."

"The very point I'd like light on," declared Pomfret. "There's one's duty to oneself; but it's so easy to plead

that; and so often as not, it's only another name for selfishness."

"The thing exists all the same, though the Christian's instinct is to doubt it, and, indeed, put any plea forward rather than his own. But there's a sane egotism as well as an insane egotism. We ought to submit to the first and defy the second. We mustn't make ourselves weaker to help those who can never be anything but weak. We mustn't reduce our fighting strength to give to beggars and maimed folk, who can never share our battle, or help us to win it. We mustn't let the cankered people fasten on us, and so rob us of our strength to do our rightful work in the world."

An inclination to tell Mr. Fuggles the secrets of his mind now prompted Nathan. He was ingenuous and open by nature, and though few existed to whom he could have made the revelation, this was one of them.

"You're right up against a thing that's giving me a lot of trouble," he said. "In a way the bother isn't of my own making; but it's just happened, and it raises some mighty difficult questions. Of all men you are best like to see the way out, and while I don't say I'll agree with your opinion, I'd much wish to hear what that opinion is. You know our family and all about us, so well as we do ourselves; and therefore, with your great sense, you might see light."

"I should like nothing better than to be useful to you, Pomfret," answered Mr. Fuggles; "and I'm far too well used to having my opinion ignored to mind whether you agree with me or not. In fact it's a criterion in a way. When men take my advice I'm always a bit doubtful about its soundness. When they do not, I judge I'm probably right."

Then the younger began to hesitate, but he had already said too much.

"After all, I don't know that I'm justified to speak," he answered, "for others are involved. It's a very delicate

business, in fact, and I'm blessed if I know whether I ought to name it."

"Seeing that Mr. Canute Witherden has done so, you needn't be so particular. But, all the same, consult your own judgment, Nat. I'm not curious."

"Witherden!"

"You know him and his views in general. You brought his ideas in here to me not long since. He's rather an absurd sort of chap. I dare say he thinks the same of me. For I've often noticed that if a man or woman strikes you as ridiculous, unknown to yourself you are probably giving them the very same impression. But he told me. He'd found it out. Under that rather sublime way of his, he's as sharp as a needle. He knows that you and Nicholas are both in love with his daughter."

"And he could mention it to you?"

"Lord bless you, I dare say he's mentioned it to fifty."

"I know what he thinks: that neither of us is near up to the mark."

"He does. And he seems pretty sure that Miss Witherden is of the same opinion. On that subject, however, others may know more than he does."

"It's true, Martin," confessed Pomfret. "And so all's said. Nick and I are both hard hit, and for the life of me—there—how to put it in words—— And after all I may be worrying my hair grey for nothing, for I dare say the old man's right, and she can't abide either of us."

"You can only learn that by finding out, I imagine."

"If you go that far, you can't turn back. There's the whole thing. God never made such another for beauty and sense and love of laughter and all the rest, and—my mother feels that if she took Nicholas, it would be salvation to him and the family—that Rosa May, so to call her, would be a fair godsend to such a man as Nicholas."

"What's all that to you, if you're in love with her? Surely you're not considering whether you shall mar your own destiny to make another man's?"

"It sounds a doubtful sort of thing."

"There are times when it might be a very fine sort of thing, I grant," admitted Mr. Fuggles. "But this isn't one of them. It's a case for common sense, not heroics. For look at it. Nick wants her and, no doubt, is working to get her all he knows. Granted she'd be a very fine wife for him; but there's one condition to it beyond your control to alter. And that is her opinion of him. And, despite all I've said about love not being vital to marriage, I know very well how often it may be. And in the case of such young women as Rosa May, or your sister, it generally is, and really decides them. That's why I'm not hoping much for myself where Jenny's concerned; and that's why I say the matter of Witherden's daughter won't admit of any self-sacrifice on your part for your family, if that's what is in your head. I don't praise you for it anyway, for it's weak-minded in you; and love of the grand sort, such as the young should feel, is much too sacred a thing to play about with. But the point for you to consider is this: that if Rosa May finds herself in love with your brother, she'll take your brother, without asking you, or anybody else, whether she shall; and if she finds herself in love with you, she won't take Nicholas, whether you come forward, or whether you don't. Such, I believe, is her quality. So it follows you can't help him by hindering yourself, any more than he can hinder you by helping himself."

"It's simple insolence, in a way, even to think she might like me, and yet—by signs—only no doubt I misread them. But it's a load off my mind to feel I can't alter what is—a great load for certain. My mother——"

"I know—at least I can very well guess."

"But not mother's fault, mind you. What more natural than, seeing such a girl and knowing Nick, she should feel it worth anything? And what more natural than she should come to me with her hopes? She knows his good is mine. His welfare is the Crowns welfare; his luck is

the Crowns luck. But of course she never thought, or dreamed, that I was—what I am.”

“Well, leave all that,” said Mr. Fuggles, “because you don’t shine at such subtle subjects. Just go your own way, and mind your own business. And remember, whatever happens, that you are not doing your brother any harm.”

“But I must tell my mother.”

“Why?”

“Because Nicholas did. Or if he didn’t, she found it out. And she told me. And it would seem a sly thing to go on in secret. And as I know what Nick’s after, he ought to know what I’m after. Then it’s all fair and above board.”

“You think of everybody but Miss Witherden so far as I can see,” answered Mr. Fuggles. “Now, if I was in your place, I’d let the whole world go to the devil till I’d won her or lost her, as the case might be. Time enough afterwards to fuss after your relations. That’s how it seems to me. Just a feat of imagination, you may say, on my part, for at my age everything is different. I’m only saying how it ought to be at your age.”

“I’m a stupid fool, and it’s worth a gold mine to me to hear you,” answered the other. “Somehow it had got to be on my conscience—almost a question of right and wrong.”

“Stuff and rubbish! I’m surprised at you, with your name for common sense.”

“’Tis for her to say ‘yes’ or ‘no,’ come to think of it—her, and only her.”

“So it would appear to anybody with the brain of a water-wagtail,” replied Mr. Fuggles, “unless you’re so conceited as to suppose it’s only a question between you two men, and that if she doesn’t take you, she’ll have your brother.”

With a mind much lightened Pomfret went his way.

He even laughed at himself, and experienced a measure of relief that, after all, the future did not entirely rest with him. He felt, also, a passing regret that he had been unable to express any friendly hopes to Martin concerning Jenny; but he was relieved to observe that Mr. Fuggles himself entertained very little expectation of success.

CHAPTER XVIII

EVENING LIGHT

Now had the hops reached to the utmost glory of their expression and splendour of harvest. They were laden with little cones of green that hung in bunches or thinly dotted the bine. The burrs, as large as grapes, were scattered through the leaves, making great contrast of colour with them. For the clusters were of a pale verdure, and the foliage had attained to darkest summer green. A sort of order had come among them, and now every hop in every rank shouldered its burden and stood at attention.

Where once all had been light and airy, with a thousand thin arms lifted to the sun and leaping to the breeze in joyous levity and youth, a change marked their structure; and while the old, glorious medley and lush life persisted, the garden alleys were grown massive and opulent. Sobriety of spirit had crept into them with access of wealth. At their feet the greater leaves were turning golden; while above, the last traceries flung themselves to the sky no more, but bent earthward under the weight of their delicate loads. From lax clusters that overhung each other, the burr thinned away down every streamer, and grew smaller in size as it reached the point. Each bine threw its festoon and curtain of laden runners, but seemed to hold the main clusters of fruit pressed to its bosom. Heavy on the ropes the fruit hung also, and bent the supporting strings to graceful concavities. The aerial rigging that knit the poles had now vanished, for every thread was twined with a living rope. The wind moved in shining undulations as it passed, and to the movement went a gentle sound; a

somniferous murmur as though the hops were making the breezes drowsy.

The very spirit of the garden was changed, and for that light-hearted saltation and frisky movement of old, no more than gentle pulsings swayed the mass, as though the wind understood and was jealous not to bruise their treasures. Each hill held its own magic disposition of leaf and fruit, its own surprises, its own banner of victory. Each displayed some unique delight to challenge the wanderer; each, as it flung silver arms to its neighbours round about, seemed the fairest, most wonderful, most utterly perfect until the next smiled into view.

And over all there ranged a subtle sense of responsibility and care opposed to the old heedless welter of expansion and growth. It was as though the innumerable maiden things had danced and leapt into motherhood, and so, with transported heart and sense, turned from youth to the more sober splendour and happiness of maturity. They were chastened: an adult matronly dignity sat upon them and crowned their comeliness with the solemnity of bearing.

Jenny and her mother walked in the gardens, and the younger mourned that the end of the hops was near.

Already Rupert Swadling and another were carrying down the bins—great wide-mouthed bags of canvas on crossed wooden legs—and placing them down the alleys in readiness for the morrow.

“Rosa May’s coming, and she and I share a bin,” said Jenny.

“Has she spoke any more about Nicholas?”

“No. At least she never begins about him. She’ll talk just as often about Nathan.”

“It’s more than time that Nathan began to help, in my opinion,” declared Mrs. Crowns. “I’ve spoke of it to him already, and though I can’t say he echoed my words, he didn’t contradict them. There’s no doubt that Rosa May values his views, and if he put in an oar oftener for Nick, he’d help us. These things can’t be rushed, but

knowing Nick, and knowing how little he likes 'no' for an answer——”

“I expect he's working up to ask her,” said Jenny. “I dare say it will happen very soon now. He'll take some day in the hop-picking, I shouldn't wonder.”

“I was never so nervous and put about in my life,” confessed Georgina, “for such a lot hangs to this, in my opinion. It cuts every way; it means possible happiness for the unborn. And, though I've no reason to suppose all is not going on well, yet something in me cries out that perhaps we might do more. Of course, we can't really—it's instinct against reason. Nobody can help, or hinder. It lies between the man and woman to decide.”

“I suppose it would be a very perfect sort of arrangement, and yet——” began Jenny. Then she stopped.

“I can't understand you,” answered her mother. “Sometimes you talk almost as if you didn't think it would be perfect. But, there—you've got your own troubles.”

“They're not troubles, if you mean Mr. Fuggles. I'm ever so sorry for him, and all the time in doubt if I need be sorry for him. When he hears to-morrow, he won't be really sorry for himself. It won't surprise him. I talked to Nat about it, and he said that Martin Fuggles was cool as a cucumber. Certainly, knowing Mr. Fuggles, it isn't such a trouble to me as it would be with Rosa May, for instance, if she had to refuse our Nicholas. Nick's alive and tingling all through with love for Rosa May. And no doubt she knows it; and if she couldn't care for him, she'd be terribly sorry for him; but it's quite different with a wise old man like Martin Fuggles. It would seem almost impertinent for a girl like me to be sorry for him. I ought to be sorry for myself to refuse him.”

“I believe you're in two minds yet,” said Mrs. Crowns.

“No I'm not, and never was. It's made me rather old thinking about it. In fact I must be a lot older than my age for him to have offered for me. It's depressing to know that, in a way.”

"Don't you feel so," answered her mother. "You're not old; or if you've got an old head on young shoulders, that's to your credit—and mine. I wouldn't have you wed where you couldn't love—God knows, for that's to wed unhappiness nine times out of ten, though Martin wouldn't grant it. But Nick's different. To me, now, I think Rosa May does love him. There's love in the very silence she keeps about him."

Jenny still doubted; but she could give no reason for her doubts. They talked long together, and then climbed the hill side by side.

"Perhaps to-morrow may throw light," said Mrs. Crowns. "To-morrow he eats his dinner with the Witherdens."

The low sunset, beating against the western wall of the hops, burned into their green, flung a shaft of light through each alley, and splashed each entrance with a golden blaze, that by contrast deepened the inner darkness; while above ran the sunset-facing front of the garden, like a castellated battlement of amber, towering and glowing against the eastern sky behind it. For here, in this direct splendour, harvest and foliage seemed to melt together into the evening radiance and flow downward in a honey-coloured stream, sparkling and dripping, to the hot soil from which all ascended. Then the light died, the sun sank, and earth's great shadow climbed up the aisles of the hops until only a final glory flickered along their crests. A warmth wakened in their fading fires, and then, with roseal tenderness, departed.

One more sunset would the gardens see before there dawned the morning of their desolation.

CHAPTER XIX

THE OFFER OF MARRIAGE

"No," said Mr. Witherden, "I do not attend divine service this morning. I want to talk to you instead."

Rosa May, well pleased to be let off church-going, and quite in the dark as to her father's purpose, consented gladly.

"So much the better. Then I can help Martha," she answered.

But this did not suit her father. Martha was a new acquisition, a maid-of-all-work who could cook.

"No," he said. "To help Martha, as you are so prone to do, is to create a false impression in her mind. Nothing is easier than to distort the perspective of the average domestic servant, and nothing is more difficult than to correct it afterwards. Human nature is such that the tendency to believe oneself invaluable to one's employers is almost universal. The belief, also, is also almost universally mistaken. Only false kindness would encourage it. Indeed, by so doing, you prepare a rod for your own back."

"You want the dinner to be successful to-day for Mr. Crowns," said Miss Witherden.

"I want the dinner to be successful to-day, and to-morrow, and every day," Canute answered. "And to ensure success, we must let Martha realise her responsibilities. They are not to be shared by you. Moreover, this sort of people are demoniacally quick to fasten on any exceptional assistance as creating a precedent. Martha promises well, so don't interfere with her performance. I caution you entirely for your own good. And besides all this, I want

to speak to you myself. A father's eyes are sharp, and of late I cannot fail to notice a very remarkable circumstance. There are two men deeply enamoured of you, Rosa May."

"That would indeed be remarkable—if it were true," she said.

"No, that is not remarkable. The remarkable thing is that they should be brothers. At least one calls them brothers by courtesy. As a matter of fact they really are brothers; but only in a natural manner. Legally, and according to the higher social standards of human life, they are unrelated."

"How silly you can be, father—despite all your sense," said Rosa May.

"You will probably live to know that I am right. For the present we are faced with this grave problem, and I mention it to-day because, in my judgment, a crisis is pending. But one question first. Silly I may be, as you say, but sensitive I certainly am. Would you rather I did not discuss this matter? I know how delicate it is, yet who can desire your happiness and welfare like your father?"

She kissed him and then sat down again.

"It's just this," she said. "Mr. Crowns has taken a sort of fancy to me; but you mustn't bother your head about it. I'm not the first."

"Don't look at him in that spirit, or speak of him in that tone of voice, Rosa May. I have every reason to believe that you are the first. I think very highly of Nicholas Crowns. He displays great magnanimity of outlook and soundness of principle. I want you to understand that I favour him. From a worldly point of view one has no quarrel with him, while as a man he is handsome and intelligent, and most gentlemanly in his ideas. All the makings of a good Christian, in fact. Socially, we may now be considered of his order, though there was a time when some distance separated us. But time brings

curious fluctuations in this regard, and the accident of one eminent man appearing in a race will often raise the entire clan above its former self. That is, if the eminent man's attainments advance the body politic; if, in fact, he deserves well of his country. The fact that we have never produced an eminent man—however, that is beside the question. So much for Nicholas Crowns; but, distasteful though it is, I must allude to Mr. Pomfret too."

"Why distasteful?" asked Rosa May.

"Because pain must always be distasteful. There is an element of pain. Mr. Pomfret, socially considered, demands our sympathy."

"Never! He'd be the last to demand any such horrid thing," said she.

"Indiscriminate sympathy—like indiscriminate charity—is a very foolish fault, and argues mental laziness, if not actual weakness. I admit that," returned her father.

"And I should be the last to sympathise with anybody, or offer such a cheap commodity, especially to such a forth-right man as Mr. Pomfret. He certainly would not desire it, as you say; but just those who are sturdy and self-contained enough not to desire it, are they in my judgment most deserving of it. I should not tell Nathan Pomfret that he had my sympathy—far from it—but none the less my sympathy goes out to him."

"Why, father?"

"First because of his very peculiar and unfortunate position in the body politic; secondly because of his hopeless affection for you."

She laughed.

"Do people really talk about 'hopeless affection' nowadays? I don't see there is anything so unfortunate about his circumstances. He's got a good farm, and good health, and a delightful family. And as to his 'hopeless affection,' I haven't seen him for a fortnight."

"We must be plain then, since you profess not to understand me. You speak of his 'delightful family'; but he

has no family. Legally speaking, Nathan Pomfret stands alone in the world—a unit related only to the rest of us by his common humanity.”

“Father, how can you be so excruciatingly foolish?”

“If I am foolish, then the law of England is foolish,” declared the insurance agent.”

“Well, it is. I’ve often heard you say so yourself.”

“In other connections it may be. Not in this. With regard to the child born out of wedlock, the law takes a most rational and intelligent position. And the Church supports the law. And I support both. This is not to cast a stone at the individual. No man has ever seen me cast a stone at anybody. But facts are facts, and the fact is that Nathan Pomfret, through no fault of his own, must find his teeth set on edge by the sour grapes his foolish parents ate before he was born. Even to talk of these things before a maiden daughter pains me; but we are faced with them, for Mr. Pomfret is also very seriously attracted by you.”

“I don’t believe he is a bit,” said Rosa May. “I almost thought he was ages ago; but he hasn’t been visible to me for a fortnight.”

“That’s nothing. He is of a slower bent of mind and more leisurely temperament than his brother. Of course he may have recognized, thanks to his own good sense, that the disability——”

“Father, I recognize no disability whatever,” she said. “And if he is to have his teeth set on edge, it won’t be the fault of his father and mother, but the fault of his own silly, narrow-minded neighbours and public opinion. But I don’t believe it. I don’t believe the world is such a fool in the twentieth century. How can we punish a man for the actions of other people? I don’t believe that God ever punished a child for the doings of its parents—whatever the Bible says.”

“The word ‘punishment’ is not one to use,” answered her father. “The consequences of certain operations are

automatic and based on the laws of Nature as well as the laws of man. They may be of a very punishing character to those who have to suffer them, however, and in the case of Mr. Pomfret, they are. Heaven knows I am large-minded enough, and often find the very Constitution of this kingdom too narrow for my opinions. I have found myself—in the spirit, of course—soaring high above Magna Charta on some occasions; and a man who dares do that must not be accused of narrowness. But in plain words—brutal words if you like, Rosa May—my daughter's husband must have no sinister bend on his escutcheon. That is absolutely fundamental. I have spoken pretty openly to Pomfret, though, of course, in general terms. When we entertained him at luncheon I elaborated my opinion."

"Did he ask you to?"

"A shrewd question, my dear, but surely needless if you knew me. He did. Otherwise I should not have thought of doing so. But for reasons now quite clear to me, he wanted to know my opinion. And he does know it."

"That hasn't stopped him, all the same," she said, with her eyes reflecting a far distance.

"His own good sense may have done so, and I hope that has happened—for your sake as well as for his."

"Why for mine?"

"Because you are thereby saved the pang of destroying a good man's hopes and rejecting his advances. It could not be. The pillars of society have a great deal to bear nowadays, and God knows how long our social system will continue to support the strain. But it shall never be said that a Witherden complicated matters, or added an act of unwisdom or impropriety to that load. I respect and admire Nathan Pomfret exceedingly. He puts a very bold face on life, and indeed pretends an indifference to his situation and an affectation of being like other people, it is impossible he can really feel. But——"

"He doesn't pretend anything whatever," she declared.

"He couldn't pretend. You're quite wrong there, father. He has never been brought up to regard himself as a pariah,

or outside the bounds of society. His friends judge him by himself—just as I do—they don't care a button about how he was born. They're only very glad he was born; because he is a good, wise, fine sort of man who makes the world happier for being in it."

"Morally, that is quite as it should be," answered Mr. Witherden. "Nobody approves Nathan Pomfret as a man more than myself; but as a husband, he must not look for his bride to a social order where long descent——"

"You wonderful old thing!" said Rosa May. "And what does all this amount to?"

"It amounts to an appeal to your good sense and good feeling and your love for your father. Yes, it amounts to all that. I will say no more. But I have an idea that the crisis is approaching. It may even be upon us. And I feel obliged, for conscience sake, to put my opinions very distinctly before you. Not, mark you, to influence your own attitude to one or other of these two excellent men—God forbid!—but just to show you mine, and to insist upon a side of the problem that might have escaped your thoughtless and unconventional spirit. I may be wrong. I hope I am wrong. I believe that, put to the test, the Witherden blood would cry out to you and prevent any really dangerous aberration. I hope so; but let that be."

"Here's Nicholas Crowns, at any rate," said Rosa May, who was looking out of the window. "And before he comes in, father, I must honestly tell you that you don't convince me a bit. We'd much better have gone to church."

"I can only sow the seed and hope One will give the increase," responded Canute. "To say that I have faith in your judgment would not be true, Rosa May; but I have faith in your Witherden heritage. I really don't think you could do anything unworthy of a Witherden."

"More do I," she said. "In fact, I'm quite sure I couldn't. I'm just as proud of being a Witherden as you are, father."

Then she rose to welcome Mr. Crowns.

Her father was not mistaken, for Nicholas had come that he might offer marriage. He did not intend to return home to Hill Crest until he could take with him the great news that he was betrothed.

The hop master had been touched to his highest emotional flight by the experience of loving Rosa May, and he did not deceive himself when he believed that never until now had he lost his heart so worthily. He moved upon a most elevated plane and, judging by his present transcendent excitement, perceived that former experiences were not to be regarded as the real thing. Indeed, he assured his spirit that he had never loved until now; and when he considered the gulf fixed between Rosa May and all other women within his experience, he was much pleased with himself. These sort of men when uplifted by the grand passion not seldom enjoy this self-applause. They are surprised when, looking back to other adventures, they contrast the sublimity of their present soaring; and they take immense credit to themselves for their power to choose so nobly and worship at such an exalted shrine. It is satisfaction at their own possibilities that provokes such self-esteem; for their habit is to credit their own natures and applaud themselves rather than the lady who has awakened such unfamiliar distinction of thought.

Nicholas, at any rate, was much gratified at the nobility of his ideas when they were occupied with Rosa May. His enterprises with the other sex had usually been marked by foolish generosity on his side and resultant cupidity on theirs. One woman only he would have married, but she did not guess it and was silly enough to deceive him. Now the past, with its little sordid intrigues and undignified experiments, lay all behind him, and Rosa May—radiant, gentle, wise, beautiful, and entirely desirable—stood on a pinnacle—the apotheosis of all that was best in womankind—and beckoned him.

Perhaps he could not honestly say that she beckoned, yet he was always welcome. Weighing their interviews,

he admitted to himself that she evaded all personal turns of conversation, and had never openly praised him, or his opinions. She had, however, commended Nathan sincerely, and declared her love for Jenny and her great admiration for Mrs. Crowns. He assumed that, while she praised his people to him, she took opportunities to praise him to them. Indeed, his mother had implied as much.

Rosa May unquestionably lifted him into a rarer air, and he was proud of himself that he could breathe it with such ease. He deceived himself in a manner somewhat entertaining during the charmed days of his love-making. Rosa May got into his head, with the result that he exhibited the phenomena of slight intoxication. With some men love induces taciturnity, aloofness, and the desire for solitude. It affects them as illness affects many animals, so that they absent themselves, avoid their kind, and feed for choice on their own thoughts. But with Crowns the symptoms were neither melancholy nor unsocial. They appeared rather in a wave of altruistic geniality that was a sort of sublimation of his natural character, and intensification of his traits. From being kind, he grew almost sentimentally concerned for his fellow-creatures. He spoke no evil of anybody, and would hear no evil. Tramps went the better for sixpences when they met him, and to his equals he displayed still greater generosity; for he would listen to other people's affairs and not be bored; he would spend precious hours while men and women detailed their own hopes and intentions; he would share the enthusiasms of others, and find himself genuinely excited by their possibilities of happiness. And he knew, all the time, that he rose above his own character to most laudable heights; he was perfectly conscious of his delightful and sympathetic behaviour. It pleased and gratified him as much as it rejoiced his mother and sister. For his own fortunes he felt very hopeful, as it became one of his flamboyant temperament to feel. Very few men, even lovers the most devout, really think the woman they love is too good for

them; and Nicholas Crowns, though he said so repeatedly to himself and aloud to his mother, did not believe it.

Now he arrived in excellent spirits and sought to amuse the Witherdens with the tale of another's woe.

"Been looking at some hops," he said. "A small man, not a hundred miles from here. But these fellows with no money ought not to grow hops. I've said a thousand times that if a man cannot afford to spend, and spend, and spend on them, he can't afford to grow them. It's a crop that calls for money every month of the year. Hops eat up money from the first day of January till the last day of December. And those I've just seen are past praying for—neglected, dirty, and not up the pole. All nettle-headed, and black with fly. The niggers* were working overtime, but they could do no good, for the blight's through and through everything. And all the green was on the ground. 'If you want to grow weeds, why bother about hops?' I said to the farmer."

"Could you help him?" asked Rosa May.

"I could not. He had my sympathy and best advice. But there was no way to do more. Too late. A month ago I might have lent him my sprayer for a week and done a little. Now it's all up. There's nothing worth picking. He's lost two acres of broad beans, too, with fly. He's one of those helpless, feckless sort of men that ought to be working for somebody else. He's quite unequal to working for himself."

"The world is full of them," declared Mr. Witherden. "In fact it is a much commoner type than when I was a boy. Experience set more store on initiative and originality in the old days, and we lads were taught to stand alone. Now the boys are taught to rely upon their neighbours for everything, and trust to their neighbour to help them, and protect them, and support them. It makes men careless of their steps if they know, when they fall, they'll be picked up again at once. My quarrel with

* *Niggers*, larvæ of ladybirds, which attack and destroy the aphids.

modern education is that instead of being tonic, it's sedative. We want more stimulant in our schools, and a premium put on pluck and originality of thought. But as originality is a nuisance in class, and any departure from the textbooks detains the teacher and upsets general progress along the beaten track, inquiry is frowned upon, and the boy with ideas gets snubbed. I speak feelingly, for I was that sort of boy. It's far worse now even than in my time at school. Things move at such a high pressure that there's no leisure nowadays to do anything but cram the boys with all the stuff they're required to hold, before they're called educated."

After dinner, Mr. Witherden, declaring himself threatened with a neuralgic headache, retired to his bedroom that the young people might be alone.

"Have no fear for me," he said. "An hour or two in a darkened chamber may very likely save the situation. I have little doubt that I shall be able to take a dish of tea with you at five o'clock. Until then Rosa May will entertain you."

Signs had led Canute to suspect his prophecy true. He believed that Mr. Crowns intended to offer marriage, and he retired, heartily trusting that his daughter would be wise. From knowledge of her, he felt mildly sanguine, yet not unduly hopeful.

And he was right. Ten minutes after his departure Nicholas threw away the cigar that Mr. Witherden had pressed upon him; and this from no disrespect to the tobacco, but because it stood between him and his tremendous enterprise. He begged Rosa May to come into the garden and to sit under the cherry tree, and when she had done so, without any preliminaries Nicholas told her he loved her.

"It's short notice," he said, "but I've loved you all my life, all the same, for I never began to live till I saw you. You've changed everything for me. It's a new world, as far as I'm concerned, since you came into it,

Rosa May. I look back, and everything that happened before seems a sort of dream. And now everything is real. It's not only that I love you with all my heart and soul—it's the difference it has made to everything else. I feel changed—tremendously changed for the better. You've made me different—kinder, larger-minded. I suppose you have the same effect on other people, too. But not in the same way, I'll swear. It's unconscious magic. It goes out of you, like the scent goes out of the flowers, I suppose. Perhaps it's radium. I'll swear some people have got a great deal more radium in them than others. At any rate you have—but I'm not sure if it's unconscious either. I hate to think that altogether, because that means I'm just like everybody else to you. It would be all up then, I suppose. But if—if you had thought twice about me—if you'd ever thought about me when I wasn't there—that's the test. If I'm in your mind sometimes, then there would be hope. Not that I'm vain, and so I can hardly think you have; and yet I won't sing small either, because faint heart never yet——. Is there anything to build on? Do you think in time you could feel anything? You've been such a perfect friend from the first—part of my life—the best part—the new, real part. And I've felt, rising up against my natural humbleness—because every man must be humble with you—I've felt all the same by words and things—by your showing you remembered what I'd said last time, and so on—I've felt that perhaps there was something about me you didn't altogether hate. I've told myself, of course, it was mad to hope; but you can't tell hope to lie down, or go to heel, like a dog. I have hoped—I have hoped with all my senses rolled into one—hoped that in time—in time I might, with luck, make you love me. I just worship you, you little dainty, delicious Rosa May, and that's all there is to it. And if you can ever think that some day—ages hence, if you like—you could care for me well enough to marry me—Oh, my God, what a heaven you'd make of the world for me—and what a heaven I'd try to make of the world for you!"

She looked into his eyes kindly, but without emotion. She ignored the gesture that opened his arms to invite her, and refused him.

"How good of you; how splendid of you to want me! I believe if girls only knew it, they can be more useful in the world without trying, than by taking thought for it and wearying themselves out trying to be useful. It's so precious to know I've been useful to you unconsciously. It was quite unconsciously. You were Jenny's brother, and first I felt pleased for her sake that you liked me; and then for my own. You have spoken beautifully to me. I am quite dazed to think I could interest you so much. But——"

"Don't say it—don't say it. I can't hear it. I'm not built to hear it. You're my life—everything! Don't you understand? Oh, Rosa May, give me a chance."

His terrible concern pained her, but did not make her admire him more. She felt that he ought not to have shown it.

"What would you have, dear Mr. Crowns? You ask—you offer yourself, and I am very proud to think you care for me so much; but what you want is impossible. Love can't come by taking thought about it, and I suppose no man would be content with the love that comes by taking pity. That's a poor thing to start life on. Your friendship has been a very precious thing in my life—the friendship of you all—but I don't love you; I don't feel, and I haven't felt, that. That's different—it moves you differently. I'm so very sorry."

"Don't be sorry. Don't obscure the point. I implore you not to be sorry, or glad; I beg you merely to think about it—about every word I said, and what a tremendous thing you've done for me, and what I want to do for you. You haven't thought about it yet. You've only thought about it for five minutes, because you couldn't have known what I was going to say. You can't—you can't wreck a man's life on the strength of what you've thought in five

minutes. You're far too fair and honourable and generous to do that. Five little minutes against my whole life! Why, a thief who's stolen a turnip gets more time before they sentence him. Don't sentence me so quickly for the crime of loving you. Think about it a little longer, for God's sake."

"You don't understand," she said. "Love is, or it is not. If I had been going to love you——"

"No, no, no!" he interrupted impatiently, "that won't do. Love doesn't always spring up in a night. Because you didn't find your world changed from lead to gold when you met me, it doesn't follow the change can't happen yet. A girl like you—why, it's only the hot-blooded, empty-headed sort dash into love. You've got too much brains, and are too thoughtful. Love isn't everything to you, like it is to some. You'll come to it slowly, and when you do, you'll find it all the more magnificent. You've never played with it, or dreamed about it, or done anything to weaken the real thing when it comes—in a blaze. I know what I'm talking about, Rosa May, and I tell you, from my very heart, because you don't love me now, that's no reason why you never will. Be just. It isn't as if I was a day behind the fair and you were death on somebody else. It's just that you don't know what love is, and I pray you—I pray you humbly and devoutly—to give me the chance to show you."

Rosa May felt rather helpless. She was sorry for him—not because she must refuse him, since to marry a man she did not love would be no kindness to the man; but because he was showing too much of himself, and, with his own words, rendering vain the admirable sentiments with which he had opened his proposal.

"I'm afraid we can't argue about it," she said. "Perhaps I don't know what love is yet. But I want at least to be your friend, and if, as you say, it has been good to you to know me, let it go on being good."

He was going to reply, with something very like scorn,

that her remark showed definitely enough that she had never loved; and he was about to declare that such love as his could not wilt and wither to friendship, but must burn heaven high or perish. He restrained himself, however, for he felt, despite his heat and most poignant smart of disappointment, that he had already said enough.

"We'll leave it there then—for the present," he answered. "You are very good and patient—wonderfully patient. If you don't love me, you don't hate me at any rate. That's something. And, of course, you will go on doing me good and making me a better man. That must be. You can't help it."

"Come and see my Mary lilies," she said. But he felt not equal to the Mary lilies.

"I'm afraid I can't switch off like that. I'm going to ask you if you'll let me clear out now. I'm—well, no doubt you understand a little what this means to me—not all—only God in Heaven knows all—but I think I'll be off. You won't mind? Your father won't mind?"

She walked down to the wicket-gate with him, and they stood there for some time talking about the hops. He implored her not to go back on her promise to come to the picking, which began next day.

"I'm afraid this—this folly of mine—will put you off us all for evermore. But don't let it. Don't punish Jenny and my mother because I've hoped such great things. Come to the picking. You won't see much of me, you know. I take the first samples off to London in a day or two."

"Why, of course," she answered. "I'm looking forward to it very greatly."

Then he left her, sore enough, but determined to regard his rebuff as a preliminary. He was a poor student of character; yet, despite his assurance to himself that he must keep her refusal in its right perspective and not permit it unduly to cast him down, he could not escape

a dreary conviction that Rosa May was not the sort of girl who would change her mind on a second challenge.

For her part, she was more moved on his departure than in his presence, and when Mr. Witherden joined his daughter he gathered the course of events without difficulty.

"I am much disappointed," he said, "less for my own sake than yours, Rosa May. I think you have made a mistake, and I take leave to doubt if you have sufficiently examined your own feelings. However, a woman's 'no' . . ."

CHAPTER XX

ANOTHER SHOCK FOR NICHOLAS

NICHOLAS CROWNS went homeward in considerable concern. He knew now that he had not anticipated any such disappointment. Deep in thought he walked along, retracing every turn of the argument, and repeating every word that Rosa May had spoken. Then suddenly he heard himself called, and, looking up, found that he was passing "The Hydrangeas," and that his sister, Jenny, and Mr. Fuggles stood at the garden gate together.

It appeared that Martin was seeing the lady off, and Nicholas remembered that Jenny—too brave to write—had gone to see her admirer and explain to him that she could not be his wife.

Mr. Fuggles, calm, inscrutable and courteous as ever, stood bareheaded and smiling beside his gate; but Jenny, though she, too, smiled, had evidently shed a few tears during their conversation. To walk home with her in his present mood was impossible to Nicholas, and to stop with Mr. Fuggles appeared only less irritating. But there seemed no alternative, and he chose the minor evil and let his sister go. He determined to stay with Mr. Fuggles for a short while.

"Just coming to see you," he said, and Jenny, as desirous to be alone as her brother, was gone.

"I wanted to say that I am heartily sorry about this business," continued Nicholas, as soon as the girl was out of earshot. "It would have been a very fine thing, and I should have felt a proud man to be your brother-in-law. It's a great disappointment to me, Martin. I'm fairly cut up about it."

Mr. Fuggles stood back to let Nicholas enter.

"Curious," he answered, "you appear to feel it more than I do. When I say that, I don't mean my disappointment is not great—it is. But this has not come as a surprise. Therefore I am armed against the rebuff. You talk as if it was a surprise to you."

"It is a surprise," declared Nicholas. "I gave her credit for better sense. But to credit a woman with sense is, of course, to show you've got none yourself. You did her a great honour, in my opinion, and she's a little fool not to accept you."

"You mustn't say that. It shows a lack of imagination. I proceeded without hope latterly. Somehow I knew that her nature was too full to feel it could link itself with mine. Yet, so much did I desire to marry her, I went through with it, knowing, or fearing, all the time that I was too—shall we say 'academical'? It is no good pretending fire if you've got none, and I did not pretend fire, because if Jenny had thought she was going to marry a fire and found that she had married a frost, that would have been a very wicked deception on my part. I promised nothing that I had not to give her, and clearly set out the disadvantages as well as the advantages. And she decided the game wasn't worth the candle; and if you blame her, I do not. Frankly, I think she's right."

"Well, you've got yourself in hand, of course, and I dare say you might have found married life rather interfere with all your affairs and theories and business in general. A man's lucky, no doubt, if books and letter-writing are able to tide him over disappointment of that sort. But I'm damned if they can me."

He reflected darkly on recent events.

"Of course, at my age, the chief activities of life are, and ought to be, intellectual," admitted Mr. Fuggles. "I've a matter in hand, for instance, that will please you as little as your sister's refusal to wed me. I'm about to attack hops."

At another time Nicholas would have protested very energetically at such a sacrilege; now he was scarcely interested.

“Why? What have hops done to you? I should have thought nobody of the name of Fuggles would quarrel with hops, seeing your family has bred the most famous hop that’s grown.”

“It’s a very ironical thing, no doubt, but perfectly true. I want to see the old staple drink of the kingdom brewed again.”

“And what is that but beer?”

“Not beer, Nicholas; but ale—the original ale drunk by high and low before these wretched concoctions called tea and coffee came to poison the kingdom, and before hops and other rubbish were used to ruin the old, pure drink brewed from malt alone.”

“Hops ruin ale!” said Mr. Crowns. “What bee’s in your bonnet now?”

“I want the original drink back—the drink of Merrie England—the stuff that was food and drink both—so generous and gracious and rich, that the people who drank it could not help feeling and showing the joy of life. I want the true barley-wine back again, and I’m going to tackle the medical profession on the subject. It would come as a revelation and be a godsend to the nation. Food and drink and a great up-builder of muscle and manhood was ale, and men, women, and children all drank it, much to their advantage. And, since it was food as well as drink, you may be sure they didn’t get so drunk in those days as afterwards, when the psalm-singing villains that murdered King Charles set out to spoil it. Cromwell and his crew heard that hops made ale thin and bitter, and deprived it of those lusty qualities for which England loved it. So they sent to Flanders for something to knock out the valiant courage and joy of breeding that belonged to ale. Wanting to abolish all the feasts and merry-makings of the land, they thought they’d go to the

root of the nation's high spirits if they fouled the nation's drink and assaulted John Barleycorn."

"That is all bosh," declared Crowns. "There's no beer like English. It's only foreigners who brew the mess you can swill all day without getting any forwarder."

"You listen to me, for I know a very great deal more about it than you do," proceeded the elder. "In 1650, if a man was caught drunk a second time, they shipped him out of England to be a slave in the Colonies. Those Puritan brutes were the forefathers of the Low Church and Nonconformist fanatics of the present day. 'Tis true we swept the Commonwealth away and set up our throne again; but the harm was done, and their leaven poisons the lump of Merrie England to this hour, just as their hops poison the drink of the people. Do the quality drink beer now? No—or if they do, it's only in secret. They're ashamed to have it on their tables; but Queen Elizabeth wasn't. She'd do her pint with the best, and so would Shakespeare and Ben Jonson. They wrote on ale, my friend; and if we go back to ale and knock beer on the head again, then you'd see two inches of height put on our men and women, and an inch or two round their chests, and more smiles and fewer frowns, and less work for the doctors."

"Another of your mare's nests, Martin."

"Don't you think it," answered Mr. Fuggles. "I know what I'm talking about. The Commonwealth adulterated the nation's vital liquor, and lied to the people that hop-beer was better, and made them drink the stuff. After the Civil War, they began their bad work, both by taxing ale and fouling ale. Long before that, England had fought the hop and beaten it. The Company of Brewers did what they could, and the Tudors punished them that put the weed into their drink."

"The 'weed'!" cried Nicholas.

"That's what it was—and is. Henry the Eighth wouldn't have it. What man with six wives would? He knew

'twas poison, and if the Dutch liked it, so much the worse for them. The doctors cried out against it, too, and said it brought colic and stone and strangulation, and all manner of ills. But what did the Puritans care for that, so long as it made the people as thin and watery and poor-spirited as they wanted them? They put away ale and set up beer, and let the 'aspiring amaritudinous hop come crawling lamely in to make a bitter difference between them.' A sleepy, good-for-nothing weed, that's what your blessed hops are; and worse, for it's the enemy of Venus, just as much as were the crop-headed knaves that brought it here."

"This is all one-sided nonsense," declared Nicholas. "I'll read up about hops and see the other side."

"You do; and then you'll find your ground is choked with overrated rubbish, and the sooner you root it up, and burn it on the bonfire, and go back to honest barley, and leave foreigners to grow hops to their harm, the better."

"To think of you attacking hops! If all your advanced ideas about things in general are like that, I don't wonder you don't bring them off, Martin."

"I'm proud in a way I don't," confessed Mr. Fuggles. "It shows the ills that I attack are stubborn, deep-seated ills, with a lot of prosperous friends behind them. There's one thing harder to fight than a nation in arms, and that's a vested interest in arms. Only Parliament can do it, and Parliament's a coward as a rule—must be under party government. Anyway, right and justice go down in Parliament quite as often as they go down everywhere else."

"That's why the people muzzled the Lords," said Nicholas.

"Just a damned silly thing that Nonconformists would do," answered Mr. Fuggles. "But wait and see, my son. The Lords chastised us with whips, the Commons will chastise us with scorpions. I shan't smart; but very likely you will. The thin edge of the wedge is in. You'll live

to see the British Constitution down and something mighty ugly put up in the place of it."

"I hope I'll never live to see anything put up in the place of hops, anyway," answered Crowns: then he took his leave, and soon the nebulous assault on his livelihood vanished from his mind before the much greater catastrophe that had darkened his life.

CHAPTER XXI

THE PICKING

HEAVY mists, born of a starry night, hung over Hill Crest at dawn. Hedges and trees loomed dimly through the vapour, and sheep lay in the meadows, mere white, amorphous smudges half revealed. There was no colour anywhere, save in the pale blue overhead, for a silver fog spread over the world and as yet only the vague disc of the sun, newly risen, throbbed through it with gathering brightness. Under the grateful steam, that promised heat to be, went two labouring men, one upright and young, one bent in the back and slovenly. The mist made them look larger than they were, and they trudged in silence, with "hop-cats" over their shoulders. These were sickles set upon long handles.

Soon Johnny Hook and Rupert Swadling were at work cutting down the stately ranks of the "Tolhurst Goldens." For six hundred hills of hops were to fall and yield their treasure before set of sun. Like a scattered herd of strange beasts, the brown canvas bins stood in the misty alleys; and to each in turn came the workers, first cutting the stems of the hops, and next, with their uplifted sickles, hacking away the ropes aloft. Then they pulled the poles and brought all down in wild forlorn confusion to earth. As the mist dislimned, its fingers spread and thinned away over the gathering desolation and the sunlight gathered strength.

For each bin the hops on three hills were cut, and soon the splendour of a hundred hills was thrown down and their poles laid across the bins ready for the pickers. The pillars of light fell fast; the clearings widened; now, where

the cloud of the hops had flaunted, was open air, and all the green lay on the ground. The yellow earth disappeared, and a verdant field took its place.

At half past six the sun shone brightly and the fog had slunk away to the water-holes. Now the standing hops sparkled, and the fruit clusters that had seemed lumpish and formless under the mist flashed golden bright against the morning blue. The hops caught and held the splendour as it ran through the yawning gaps in their ranks.

Earth was very dry, and pole-pulling proved hard work; but Swadling and Hook made progress and widened the clearings deftly. Before seven o'clock broad spaces spread through the stricken hops as though a tornado had swept them.

Then came a tinkle of voices, and the folk began to stream down the lanes in clusters and companies. There fell the tramp of feet, some slow, some swift, some light, some heavy. Wheels creaked also, and there was chatter and laughter, and shout of morning greetings as the procession wound along. Men, women, and children arrived, welcomed each other, and stood together in a growing company at the edge of the gardens. All brought baskets and bundles, and there were perambulators and little home-made carts on wooden wheels containing babies. For many a cottage at St. Michael's village was shut till evening, and whole families had come to the picking. Elder children tramped beside their mothers and wheeled the go-carts. Many old people brought chairs and stools, for they sat at their work. Such men as came to pick were all old, for picking is not young men's work; but the bulk of the company was composed of women and children. Blue prevailed among them as a colour—blue skirts and blue aprons and blue umbrellas—spacious old-time "gamps" to open above the bins and shield the owners' heads from sun and rain. There were boxes and baskets too, for when a family controlled a bin, all hands might not work together at it, and the children squatted round would each do their

best to swell the yield. The tiniest four-year-old that could pick would have his little sprays of the bine handed to him, and a box to hold them.

Broad and beamy matrons, slim girls, grey-beards, grandmothers and bright-eyed children clustered together with smiles and cheerful looks. All wore a brave, morning face, and preserved that immemorial holiday aspect proper to the picking. They laughed and chatted. They hid their jealousies and cares, praised the weather, compared babies, studied the hops, and waited for the drawing.

"I love the 'Tolhurst Goldens,'" said a young widow in black, with a little black brood of four children about her. "The hops come away so nicely. I'd sooner pick them than any."

"Give me 'Fuggles,'" answered Miss Sarah Dunk, who had just arrived with Nina.

"'Tis a heavy crop, I'm glad to see," said an old man. He wore a green shade over one eye, and a blue-clad woman, as broad as she was long, asked him concerning his injury.

"Doctor's hopeful, but I don't know," he answered. "I feel my right eye's dead in my face; but the left's holding to work very well, thank God."

They speculated as to the "tally," or rate at which their labours would be paid. The sanguine hoped for a shilling for six bushels—generous wages.

"You can count on Mr. Crowns for that," said Milly Daynes, "though with such heavy crops, I dare say a good few won't go above tenpence."

Then came the master with Jenny; and old pickers, quick to note the expression on his face, were a little concerned, for Nicholas was by no means so expansive as usual.

"It's going to be tenpence—he ain't in a good mood, I'm fearing," said Miss Dunk; but meantime Jenny, finding Rosa May with another girl from Tenterden, was able to announce that a shilling for six bushels would be the price.

The good news ran swiftly through the company, and in the best of spirits they crowded together for drawing the bins.

Nicholas, after all, proved not unfriendly. He greeted old friends, shook hands with many a woman, and patted the children on the head. For their part, the folk congratulated him on his hops, and were glad that his luck held.

"It's not so all round," said an old woman, who had picked for fifty years, and knew as much about hops as Nicholas himself. "But this dip in the land gives you a good pull over the people up aloft on the flat. I've seen no 'Tolhursts' like these."

"No more you will, ma'am," declared Rupert Swadling. "Not if you look from here to Jericho."

Then came the drawing of lots for the bins, and that done, the company spread and scattered through the hops to reach the clearings. Above each bin the groups assembled, and no two groups were alike. They ranged from youth to age, from ancient veterans to fat-fingered children sitting at their mothers' feet, or babies in the perambulators. The old woman who had served the bins for fifty years still stripped the bine as swiftly as the best; the widow and her little ones were all busy to the smallest. They had a family bin, and helped each other to fill it. Many children, after an hour or two of the new fun, grew weary, and stole away together to the blackberries and wood strawberries in the hedges; but this little black-clad party, confronted with grave issues and their father dead, worked without ceasing, and only looked up for praise sometimes to their mother's eyes. They laboured bravely, yet it seemed that their small hands would never fill the gaping bin. Hard by the semi-blind man patiently picked, but with pitiful slowness. He shared a bin with a young fellow, but they did not work together. The bin was partitioned, and the blind man's half filled very gradually, while the youthful picker proceeded at a great

pace and bragged the while that he would fill his half bin in four hours. Two sharp-nosed, elderly women at the next bin laughed at him, and told him he ought to be doing man's work, not women's. Whereat he scowled and was silent.

Sarah Dunk and Nina had a bin between them. Sarah's old hands and arms, protected up to the fingers by a pair of stockings with the toes cut out, flickered over the hops like lightning and sent them showering steadily into the bin. Nina, too, was very speedy, though emotion made her unsteady. Her fingers darted into the great masses of the fallen hops, where they lolled on their poles supported against the bins; then she cut off the hop masses, swiftly tore away the fruit tassels, and with a single action that carried them to the gathering heap below, stripped off the tail of the cluster and its leaflets together.

Mr. Billy Beken was one of the tally men, and though the time for his notebook and bushel measure had not yet come, he moved about among the people and gossiped at every bin.

"Hast heard about Nina?" asked Sarah Dunk, when he came to her place. He had not, and for the hundredth time Sarah told of her niece's jilting. The dull, dazed feeling in Nina's heart had now given place to violent anger. Sometimes she lifted her lowering eyes to Johnny Hook, where he hacked and chopped and brought poles to the bins; and if her eyes could have slain him, no doubt Johnny would have fallen.

Miss Dunk explained the situation without consideration for her niece's feelings, and indeed reserve was unnecessary, because Nina cared not how many knew her wrongs. The more who heard of the outrage, surely the greater the number of enemies for Mr. Hook.

"Coming home from Biddenden I was," said Sarah. "And I'd been buying these very stockings on my arms at this minute, and he stepped up to me—that red-headed young devil over there pulling hop-poles. And I was

glad, for when along with Mrs. Daynes in her sweet-shop over at Tenterden, buying a pinch of peppermint for my stomach, I'd heard a thing that properly astonished me. Which was that yonder man had been saying I'd got a snug nest-egg, and this poor girl would be sure to have it when I was gone."

"He's a grabber—a grabber," said Mr. Beken; "I never did hold with him."

"And, like other grabbers, he proper over-reached himself that night, and if ever there was a case of Providence giving a bad chap rope enough to hang himself that was the case. 'Twas Nina's guardian angel sent me to Bidden-den for these stockings, and the man who doubts it is a liar. For, little knowing she was on the brink of a fearful disaster and had promised to marry the rogue the very next day, and run away with him that very night, he overtook me in all my innocence; and when he gave me good-night, civil as you please, much to his surprise I answered, and asked him to carry my basket, and go a bit slower. Which the rip was very glad to do; and then I played with him, I can assure you, and it was put into my heart by God Almighty to say just the very thing to save this poor female here from his clutches!"

Mr. Beken displayed great interest. He sat down beside them on the framework of the bin.

"The events that happen!" he said. "It's no doubt, however, that God works from inside a man and the Devil from outside."

"The Devil only finds room where he makes room," answered Miss Dunk. "But it's allowed us Christians to fight the Devil with his own weapons, I believe. Anyway, you can beat him with them quicker than any others. I was cunning as a fox, I assure you. I told the man, as if I thought he hadn't heard it, that I'd got a dollop of money put away. And that was a lie, Billy Beken, for I haven't. But the Lord put the lie into my heart for His own good purposes, and I'm not going to argue about it, and I'd do it again to-morrow."

"So long as your own conscience don't judge you——"

"It don't—and it's nobody else's business. Yes, I said I was snug, because if I'd said I hadn't twopence, which is the solemn truth, he'd not have believed me. Chaps like him always shy at the truth, but give 'em a lie and they'll generally rise to the bait. And then I told him in so many words that I'd sooner see Nina in her coffin than married to him, and that, engagement or not, the date she took him, she'd be cut out of all my savings for evermore and the lot made over to somebody else. Of course 'twas meant to choke him off her; because I knew he was a rogue and only wanted her for what he could get. And, as I've pointed out, 'twas quite fair to Nina too, because if he wanted her for love, he'd have snapped his fingers at my fancied savings; and if he wanted her for my money, he'd show himself a proper scamp, and it would be a merciful escape for her. And there it was; and that's what happened."

"A very cunning, far-reaching plot on your part," said Billy; "cleverness made alive, in my opinion."

"Nina can tell you the rest," answered Sarah, whose fingers while she talked ceased not for a moment to send the burrs showering into the bin.

"I'm sick of it," answered Nina. "All I know is that I want that man to get his reward, and I shan't look people in the face till he's had it."

"'Twas certain the Lord's angel that spoke with my voice, and you'll not find a better example of such a thing in the Bible," declared Miss Dunk. "'Tis like the holy case of Isaac going to be offered up, and the ram caught in the thicket. Near as a toucher in fact; and if I hadn't met the beastly man that evening, this girl would be his unfortunate wife to-day. But he heard me, and said 'good-evening' very civil, and instead of running away with her to damnation a few hours later, he just changed his mind, and let her cool her heels in the hops till morning, and then came over next day smoking his pipe and as

bold as brass, to bluff it out. And when I met the wretch again, I had the bitter pleasure of telling him that he'd heard God's angel speaking with my voice, and that I'd bowled him over with a weapon from his master, the Father of Lies !"

Miss Dunk chuckled.

"Lord !" exclaimed Mr. Beken, "what a case of cause and effect, miss !"

"You trumpet it, you trumpet it," she said; "Nina here wants for the man to be handled, and no doubt he should be, but what'll hurt him more lasting than a dozen black eyes, would be to know every decent person has heard the tale. And when they hear that he's made a fool of a young woman, let 'em hear at the same time how an old woman made a fool of him."

"It shall be noised abroad if I can do it," he promised. "Your bin's filling, I see. Fine heavy burr, without a doubt, this year. They'll be going to oast by noon."

Fifty yards down the line Susan and Milly Daynes shared a bin. They were great pickers, and the hops flew from their hands while they laughed and chaffed with their neighbours, and cried out at the blazing sun. For now the gardens glowed; the heat danced, and the lush leaves shrivelled on the fallen bines. Mr. Hook's performance was widely known already, and the Daynes sisters had learned it from their mother, who received the story with wealth of detail from Sarah Dunk herself.

Johnny therefore found the hop-gardens a bed of thorns. His business was to keep the bins supplied with poles, and his face was as red as his hair, and his heart exceedingly sore and savage before the sun had climbed overhead. Being quite unable to stem the torrent, he fell back upon a dark saying and shrugged his shoulders and pretended indifference.

"Ah !" he answered them, "one story's only good till another's told."

"Let's have yours then," cried Milly Daynes. "By

all accounts you were kidded to believe Nina Dunk was going to get a fortune, and when you heard she wasn't, you turned her down and let her bide all night out here waiting for you, while you snored in bed."

"Not the first time you've diddled a silly girl either," added Susan. "They ought to treat you as I treated you, when you came hunting round after me."

"You!" he said. "Who wants a hulking great gipsy woman with black teeth?"

"Better black teeth than a black heart," she answered. "I shall buy a fine set of white teeth when I'm married; but you can't buy another heart. You're a damned scamp, and a dirty red fox, and ought to be hunted, like any other fox. And some fine day I hope Ernest Brunger will hunt you with all his hounds."

"No good if he did," said Milly. "No decent dog would bite vermin like him."

Whereupon Mr. Hook grew coarse, but had much the worse of the deal. He punished them presently, however, by keeping them waiting for poles and refusing to hear their shrill complaints. Rupert Swadling then came to the rescue with more hops. It was his hour. Though he streamed with perspiration at his labours, he grinned into the five and thirty bins, and rejoiced to see their swelling wealth. Flour of sulphur had been dusted over the hops a week before, and the dust made Rupert cough, but he beamed though his tears ran.

Then Nicholas Crowns came back to the gardens, and Billy Beken had speech with him.

"Just going to begin the tally," he said. "Wonderful fine hops. Never was better 'Tolhursts.'"

"How are they? It's hot."

"The spirit is good," declared Mr. Beken. "Nobody can keep the people sweeter than I can when they're picking, and the thing is to start in a good mood. They won't be driven and ordered to-day—too hot for that; but work's going well."

“Good—take things easily.”

“I shall do so,” answered the old man. “If you begin too harshly with the bushel measure, you’ll always find they’ll grumble, and a bad spirit gets in the garden. And once in, ’tis terrible hard to drive it out again. Gently does it. But don’t you fear them. Very good work’s going on.”

Nicholas nodded. “Go light with the measure here and there—Mrs. Beale for one.” He pointed to the little black widow.

Billy started the tally at the end of a row, and as he measured, the contents of the bins was poured into sacks. Presently an open wain, drawn by two horses tandem fashion, arrived for the sacks, and soon Hill Crest’s first hops began to leave the gardens for the oasts.

Nicholas, moving among his people, caught sight of the bin where Jenny and Rosa May worked together. There was no partition, for Jenny had declared that she and her friend must share alike, and Rosa May, ignorant of the advantage that would thus accrue to her inexperience, made no demur. A pink sunbonnet she wore, and her gown was white; while Jenny had a dark blue sunbonnet and a dark blue gown.

Crowns marked them immediately, but he only drifted to them by gradual stages, and stopped to talk beside many other bins before he reached them. At some the work progressed in silence; at some there was noise and chatter and laughter. The widow and her children picked for dear life, and spoke but little. Jenny and Rosa May were not working very hard. Indeed, they often stopped and wandered about among the mothers and babies. Most of the people worked steadily enough, however, and the steady pluck, pluck, pluck at each bin was like the sound of cropping animals at graze. Children played truant, and the elders’ shrill voices rang out, “Arthur!” “Mabel!” Then the small things returned.

“Bless the young ’uns!” said a mother, whose crying

infant was hung like a charm to her bosom, so that her hands should be free, "what with them and the sun on your head, it ain't all fun."

"Better sun than rain," answered her neighbour. "You wait till the rain comes and you've got to pick all day wet to the skin—and your kids too!"

Nicholas approached his sister's bin. He had not seen Rosa May since their parting of the day before, but she received him without self-consciousness.

"Look," she said. "Jenny tells me I'm very quick for a beginner, but it's pure flattery on her part."

He applauded the work.

"Magnificent!" he answered, though there was really little to praise.

"D'you know what Mr. Witherden advised this morning?" asked Jenny, full of laughter. "He told Rosa May she ought to bring a pair of scissors! Fancy picking hops with a pair of scissors. And he's lived in Kent all his life!"

"Don't you tire yourself," said Nicholas. "I believe you're working too hard."

"I'm not working nearly hard enough," confessed Rosa May. "Jenny does the work, and she's not working very hard either. The children are so fascinating."

"Rosa May will spend all her earnings on sweets for them to-morrow—see if she doesn't," said Jenny.

Nicholas looked at his watch.

"It's nearly dinner-time," he said. "Why not knock off now and come up to the house? And afterwards I'll show you the oasts, if you like."

"No, no, I've come to work, and I don't believe I've earned sixpence yet," answered Rosa May.

"Let's see; here's Billy Beken and the measure."

Mr. Beken had reached them, and with him came a yellow sack for the contents of the bin. But though he shook up the hops with all his might, the results were meagre.

"We've made about one and sevenpence between us," said Jenny. "We'll work harder after dinner."

A whistle sounded ten minutes later and picking ceased. The people streamed away to the shadow of the hedges; a hundred baskets were opened—and as many bottles of milk and water and cold tea. A few of the old men uncorked something stronger.

Presently Nicholas walked to Hill Crest with the girls. He was melancholy, and Rosa May knew why, but Jenny did not. As yet his family were ignorant of what had overtaken him. Rosa May also lacked her usual high spirits, though there had been plenty in the day to arouse them. Nor was Jenny at her merriest, for she felt conscious that a cloud existed between her brother and her friend, despite their laboured endeavours to conceal the fact.

CHAPTER XXII

GEORGINA CROWNS AS MOTHER

MRS. CROWNS at this season found ample matter for thought. She did not blame Jenny for declining the offer of marriage from Martin Fuggles, but none the less she regretted her daughter's decision, because Jenny at twenty-eight years of age was not, in her judgment, too young for the man, and as his wife, Jenny's future position must have been assured. So, at least, from her middle-aged standpoint it appeared to Georgina Crowns, who, though a clever woman, was not clever enough to remember what it felt like to be twenty-eight, or to recollect that the perspective proper to the twenties is apt to set a very formidable barrier of time between youth and the limits of middle age. To Mrs. Crowns, Martin Fuggles still appeared not very far removed from his prime, and, while granting to herself that Jenny must see him with other and sharper eyes, she by no means visioned Martin with the high power of her daughter, or guessed how cruelly magnified are the marks of sixty years to the pitiless focus of youth.

But the matter of Jenny baulked small beside the far greater business of Nicholas, and though he did not confide in her to the extent of confessing his disappointment, she found it out very swiftly. From the first morning of hop-picking, when Rosa May came up to Hill Crest to dinner, Mrs. Crowns knew that Nick had proposed and been declined.

She could not have pointed to speech, or counter-speech, as confirmation: it was not what either said, or left unsaid that convinced her; but the atmosphere they created had

changed. They laughed and chaffed as usual, yet behind the talk a new thing existed. There were pauses and relapses; and anxiety appeared in the eyes of Nicholas, and a fleeting sobriety and wistful regret shadowed the face of Rosa May, when she looked at him, unseen save by the side-glance of his mother. The meal occupied but a short time, and Georgina was glad when it ended.

"See Rosa May back to the gardens, Nick," she said as they rose from the table. "I'm wanting Jenny for a bit, but I won't keep her long."

It was not what Nicholas desired for the moment, but he prepared to obey. They went out together, Rosa May begging him not to do so, and then Georgina, hardly waiting till they were beyond earshot, inquired what Jenny might know.

"Only that she's not herself, mother. In fact, jolly unlike herself. She's been trying to be like herself all the morning, and if you hadn't known her as well as I do, I dare say you'd have thought she was as cheerful and happy as ever. But she isn't. Little things make me think so—a sort of funny, listless way, quite foreign to her. She kept catching herself, you know, and pulling herself together. But she was queer, and didn't enjoy the hop-picking much, and would roam about restlessly and talk to the people. I've never seen her like it before. I believe it's about the nearest approach to being miserable that Rosa May can reach. But what's the matter——"

"Did you ask her?"

"No, I didn't," answered Jenny, "because I had a sort of foggy idea I knew."

"How was she with Nick?"

"The same as ever."

"No, she wasn't. That's what I could see and you could not. I'll tell you what's happened, only for the Lord's sake don't let it alter you when you go back to her. Just behave as if it was nothing. It happened yesterday. Nick was glum as a bear at supper and ate nothing. He's offered and she's said 'no.'"

Jenny did not appear very much astonished.

"It might be that. That would make what I think all the likelier."

"Never mind what you think—it's what I know," said Mrs. Crowns. "The first stage has been reached, and Rosa May has done what a lot of everyday girls would have done, though not what I should have expected her to do, being, as we all know, a bit out of the common."

"How d'you mean, mother?"

"Why—like this. It's a sort of maiden feeling with a lot—the usual, muddle-headed virgins—that to say 'yes' at once is too forward. Some shilly-shally for mistaken ideas of modesty, though they may love the man with all their might; and some put him off for cunning, to make themselves run up to a better figure in his eyes. Some do it for silliness, and some for craft. But in her case there was no need for either, and it was outside her character to say 'no.' She ought to have said 'yes'; and now she knows it; and the reason why she's odd to-day and down on her luck is just because she did say 'no.' That's my reasoning, and you won't better it."

Mrs. Crowns felt more comfortable for this exposition. It heartened her. She regarded the theory as an inspiration; but her daughter appeared quite unconvinced.

"Rosa May never would have done a thing like that, I believe," declared Jenny. "For you can't say she's silly, and you certainly can't say she's crafty. She's full of sense—about men even—and she's open as daylight. You talk as if it could be only one thing or the other that made her refuse Nicholas—if she has refused him. But there's another thing that could have made her say 'no' to him—the first thing and the only thing that ever would have made her say 'no.'"

"And what might that be?" asked Mrs. Crowns.

"Why, the same thing that made me say 'no' to Mr. Fuggles. If Nick has asked her and got a refusal, then Rosa May doesn't love him. Surely you grant that?"

Mrs. Crowns, however, refused to grant anything of the kind.

"How can a child like you suppose you see further into people than I do?" she asked.

"I know Rosa May so well," explained Jenny.

"But have you ever marked anything to show she wasn't very friendly to Nicholas?"

"If it comes to that, mother, you might as well say she was very friendly to Nathan. She's always full of praise for both."

Mrs. Crowns stared.

"Nathan! A bright young creature like that to care for Nathan!"

"Why not? Any sensible girl might be drawn to Nathan—for his sense, just as any bright girl might be drawn to Nick for his nonsense. Not that exactly, perhaps; but you know what I mean. And after all, Nat can be full of fun too. He's not a sober-minded sort of man. Besides, who knows what draws what?"

"You take my breath away," answered Georgina. "It's the business of children to take their parents' breath away in this generation, seemingly. But when all's said, you're wrong."

Jenny laughed.

"My opinion's of little worth, I reckon. But you know Rosa May well enough to know she wouldn't play about. It's just that. If Nick proposed to her and got 'no,' then she meant 'no.' And the reason was that she didn't love him. But how can you tell what happened? She may have put him off. She may just have said she'd think it over. I don't mean for a moment to say she loves Nat; but I do mean to say it wouldn't be a miracle if she did."

"I'm not deceived," declared the other. "It lies between Nick and her and—now I'm going to see Nathan this minute. And even if, in an unthinking moment, she did refuse Nicholas, what's that? Nothing. And if that

did happen, it explains Rosa May's frame of mind to-day. She's slept on it, and she's probably feeling at this moment she made a mistake."

"If that's so, Nicholas will give her plenty of opportunity to put it right."

"She's miserable because she's thrown him over," repeated Mrs. Crowns, "and I'm right, and you're wrong, so all's said."

Jenny shook her head doubtfully.

"We shall soon know; I'm going back to her now. They'll have had a talk, I dare say."

"My son's got his pride, too, you must remember. Very likely it won't come right in a minute. If she said 'no' to him, you'll find she'll stand in the shadow for a bit."

"Not long, I fancy," returned the daughter. "All we can positively say is that Nick is in love with her; and being what he is, he won't take the first 'no' for an answer very long. He's not proud—not where Rosa May's concerned."

"Help it then; don't hinder it. If she's back at work, say the word in season, and if she isn't at the bin, no doubt they're taking a walk out of the way. But if she's back and Nick haps along again presently, you make an excuse and clear out and leave them alone."

"He couldn't talk to her long in the midst of the pickers," said Jenny; "but I'll do what I can. Perhaps she'll confide in me."

They parted, and Mrs. Crowns immediately put on her hat, took a parasol against the sun, and walked over to Bugle. The distance was short, but Georgina Crowns found it long enough to embrace many moments of unquiet thought. Reason struggled with desire, and memory with conviction. She wished, above all things, to see Rosa May the affianced bride of Nicholas, yet perceived that more than her wishes must go to accomplishment of such an end; but she ruled out most emphatically the possi-

bility of any counter-attraction for the girl. Then memory suddenly summoned a vanished scene, and showed her that Jenny might indeed be right. For, having set aside Nathan as out of the question, Nathan immediately dominated her sub-conscious mind, and there came the vivid recollection of a past hour with Nathan, when he had puzzled her not a little on this very subject by his apathy before her enthusiasm. She had sat on his coat on the hedge of Nick's hop-garden and urged him to aid her ambition by all means in his power; and he——

Mrs. Crowns stood still under the weight of this memory. But she fought it, for the incident was too fresh and new and trivial to make a mark upon earlier hopes and desires. She held that the welfare of Nicholas had become vitally involved: long brooding had convinced her that only by a mating with Rosa May might fulness of happiness and assurance of future prosperity be won for her younger son. It was preposterous, then, that this meagre suspicion could frighten her away from the deep-seated conviction of her mind. What did a sensible, solid man like Nathan want with a wife at all? He wasn't the marrying sort. There was something absurd about the very idea of little Rosa May—— But Georgina loved Nathan as dearly as Nicholas, and now her love began to make her uncomfortable. On the top of her mind, awoke a sort of resentment that Nathan had blundered in at all. She felt superficially irritated with Nathan. But down beneath began an unrest inevitable; and the dismay gathered. She strove to escape from it by scepticism. She flouted the possibility hinted at by Jenny as absurd. But that did not kill it, and she began to walk on again. Next she pinned her hope to Rosa May. Even granting the remote chance that Nathan, with a temporary failure of perspective—the delusion of love—might be thinking vaguely of Rosa May, it was perfectly certain that Rosa May could not put Nathan before Nicholas. All experience of young things convinced Mrs. Crowns on that point. Was it

likely that two people, so obviously made for each other would not see and feel it ? Nicholas, of course, appreciated the discovery and, with true Crowns vigour, had not let the grass grow under his feet before setting to work to achieve his happiness. And the girl must answer to his fire.

Georgina assured herself that all would be well ultimately: that Rosa May, at her age, and with her peculiar love of laughter, could not for long hesitate between the men, even if Nathan interested her by his great good sense. She added to this a secret assurance, for her conscience's sake, that Nathan on his part really could not be attracted; and by the time she reached Bugle the assurance had grown to a conviction that he was not. A man so sane and with such a sense of humour would see the absurdity. For it was absurd, or if not actually absurd, then inconvenient. She argued herself down. She determined to ignore this nonsensical theory of Jenny's, and appeal once more to Nathan to help in the salvation of Nicholas. She assured herself that her mother's heart would never have reached this determination if the faintest possibility of Nathan loving Rosa May really existed. A mother's heart is so lightning quick and unerring—so Mrs. Crowns had always understood. Nathan, therefore, must be won to work for Nicholas. She would kill two birds with one stone, for if Nathan in truth harboured some misty and futile thoughts of Rosa May, his love of Nicholas, his love of his mother, his fine feelings, his sense of propriety, and so forth, must swiftly banish them when he knew the truth. Then memory reminded poor Mrs. Crowns remorselessly that she had already told Nathan the truth; but she was now quite out of temper with memory, and refused it any further consideration.

All this and more sped through the mind of the mother in about seven minutes. Then she entered Bugle, breathing rather strongly, and with her nostrils distended.

She met Mrs. Ledger, and sat down and fanned herself.

"Piping hot and more thunder offering, I do believe," declared Nathan's housekeeper.

"Where's my boy, Jane?"

"About. He'll come along any minute."

"Life can be a most distracting business, Jane."

"I never heard as it could be anything else," said Mrs. Ledger. "It's distracting from the moment the babe draws its first breath, and gets wind in his stomach, to the time when the dying man breathes his last."

"D'you mark anything unusual about Nat? If you do, you can tell me in confidence."

"I do not," declared Mrs. Ledger. "He never changes to me. If anything, he grows more thoughtful and quieter as he gets older; but there's nothing unusual in that, with such a brain as his."

"You don't think, for instance, he's making up to a girl?"

"It wouldn't put him out of gear if he was. And I shouldn't know it if he was. He'd keep on as usual—not like Henry Honeysett, for instance, who carries his troubles on his face, and would talk to the calves about it, if they'd listen to him. But as to a girl, I should think it was very likely."

"Why, Jane?"

"Because he's such a natural man. He's just what you might call a type of the best sort of the everyday human."

"The best sort aren't the everyday sort, in my belief," said Georgina. "The best sort are rare, and always were, and always will be. But I know what you mean very well. It's natural for a healthy, high-minded chap like Nat to fall in love in due season. And Jenny tells me he has done so."

Mrs. Ledger reflected.

"It wouldn't be any surprise, though a wife for him would be 'good-bye' to Bugle for me. However, I've always seen the chance of that. Excuse my mentioning it."

"It's all in the air, and only in the air. I can't believe it myself."

"Ask him then. A mother such as you have the right."

Mrs. Crowns was going to speak, but her answer took the form of a nod, for at this moment Nathan Pomfret appeared.

Georgina upbraided him.

"Haven't seen a sight of you for a month of Sundays," she said. "It's too bad, Nat."

"I know," he answered, kissing her. "It is too bad, and all my fault. Come into the garden and look at the medlars."

"I don't want medlars; I want you. My mind gets heavy if I don't see you for a week—just a restless sort of feeling, though goodness knows there's more in it than you can put right. Still you ought to try."

He picked up a folding-chair and went before her. Through the farmyard to a wicket he passed, and then into a great orchard of mixed plums, apples, and pears. At a shady corner not far from a pond he stopped and spread the chair. Round about ran chickens, and, sound asleep, close at hand, lay four little pink pigs.

"Nat," she said, "if life don't get a bit clearer, I shall have gout again. It's nibbling, and very well I know the reason."

"You want a change, I'm thinking."

"Don't begin that. You understand what's the matter. It's Nicholas and that girl. Things have happened if I've got eyes in my head. She's here picking with Jenny."

"I know."

"There it is! On every other subject under heaven you jump to meet me in a very understanding manner; and so it should be between a mother and her firstborn. For we put our very selves into our first, in my opinion. There's an excitement and novelty and mystery about our first that we never quite reach up to again. I say you've been my own self reflected back to me, and you see with

my eyes, and think with my thoughts—in everything but Nick and Rosa May. And—oh, Nat, why the mischief can't you understand what it would mean?"

She was strung up now to fight for Nicholas at any cost of Nathan. She had for the moment ordered memory to heel. Her son did not answer, and she went on:

"Providence wants help sometimes, and it's up to us to help it. Here's the best thing that could happen for our race; but it's hanging fire badly, and quick as I am to read signs, I can't for the life of me see where the hitch lies. Surely to God Nick's future is as much to you as it is to me? You've never asked, like that hateful Cain, if you was your brother's keeper, because well you knew when your father died, that you was, and always would be. Providence made you what you are for all our sakes, and first of all for Nick. And many and many a time your strong hand has helped him out of a mess, and your good sense set his feet firm again. And here he is in sight of salvation, in my opinion; and when I mention it, you hang fire as if you had got a stroke! I'm doing what I can, and Jenny's doing what she can, and Canute Witherden, the girl's father, is at her in a quiet, gentlemanly, dogged sort of way. But every little helps, and none could help like you, and I do think you might do your bit for all our sakes."

"What the mischief can I do, mother?"

"There! Fancy you even asking the question in that tone of voice. You can do a lot, for Rosa May thinks a deal of your wisdom; and to me she said, in so many words, that it was a very fine and beautiful sight to see how dearly fond you and Nicholas are of each other. And that being so, can't you see that if a man like you sang Nick's praises to her, and gave her a sight of all the goodness of Nick—things he can't mention himself—you'd be helping her to see her luck? I've done what I could, and she's listened very nicely. But a man's a man, and it would be weightier far in her ear to hear you say that never

was a better chap on earth. You've done many and many a rare good turn for Nick, and gone out of the way, and put yourself about for him, in time, and money, and thought, and everything else. I don't forget one of the fine things you've done for him—not one. You've been a rare brother to him, and God'll bless you for it; but here, at the most vital moment of his life—— It beats me—it properly beats me.”

“Mother,” he said quietly, “I love Rosa May myself.”

But she was now heart and soul for Nicholas, and her real sentiments concerning Nathan had no opportunity to emerge at this moment. She could only fight one battle at a time, and, very much to Nathan's surprise, his confession did not overwhelm her.

“If you do, so do I, so does everybody. And in your case, being old for your age—almost in sight of middle age, you might say, you ought to feel—— I tell you, Nat, that she's just on the verge. Youth cleaves to youth, and a child like her, for she's little more—to her you'd be more like a father than anything—same as you are to Nicholas. But if you love her, then you love them both, and such a love's keen-eyed, for certain. And you must see that a match between them would be a godsend to both. You must see that?”

“Be sure I've thought a lot about it.”

“God knows I've never put one of you before the other,” said Mrs. Crowns; “and if there's been any favouritism, you, as eldest, had it. But I can look farther ahead than you, or your brother either, and I know you both a long sight better than you know yourselves, and I say this: that the wife for you is well in range, and as sure to come along as autumn follows summer; but the wife for Nick—— I suppose by your silence you think it's improper of me talking like this, but I know better. It's my duty. I'm somebody still, and you're only boys to me, though men to yourselves, no doubt; and I say this, Nat, that you're

wrong. And, knowing your sense and power of right feeling, I believe you know you're wrong."

He was much pained. He had thought at least that his confession would silence his mother.

"I reckoned when you heard how it was with me, you'd feel, at any rate, you couldn't talk more about it," he said. "I can't argue on such an awful, delicate subject, my old dear; and I dare say you're right, and it's May and December, and if anybody's improper, it's me. I don't know how to answer. I wonder almost if you know what you're talking about, or remember what you felt like when you loved father first. You've fairly froze me. But after all—love—there! I can't say any more even to you."

"I'll go home, then," she said, rising. "If anybody had told me that you would talk to your widowed mother like that—and cold-shoulder your brother, and put self before all! And all my sense thrown away and——"

"Mother, I'm only two years older than Nick, and I'm—mother, don't think so ill of me. There's nothing done. It's all for the future to solve. Would I willingly come between you and your hopes, or Nick and his hopes? Can I help feeling as I feel? I'd die a thousand deaths rather than do him a bad turn. But be reasonable. How can I do him a bad turn? She's free to him. I don't stand between."

"You would if you could," she said. "And that's as much as to contradict everything that's gone before, and to say you don't love your brother!"

"Mother!"

"Ope the gate. I can't talk any more now. I'm in a fair tremor. We'd best grow calm—the pair of us—and come to our senses. I don't blame you for speaking out. You knew Nick was in love with her, and it's fair he should know you are. And I say this: you've gone back on yourself a good deal. And you've gone back on the whole Crowns race, in my opinion, including your own father. I never should have thought you'd have put Number One

to the front like that. I never did when I was young, and I never taught you to do it. You're only thinking of your own self. You want another person's ewe lamb, and that person your brother; and I wish I had died before I'd ever been faced with such a crusher."

He was very gentle with her. A fitful inclination to laugh swept him, but he did not laugh. A life-long habit to rate his mother's opinion as the most important in the world did not desert him.

"You take it much too seriously," he said. "I'm middle-aged in mind, as you tell me—no doubt. I dare say you're right all through. I dare say that my duty—man does not live by life alone, I know that, mother. There's bigger things for us to rise to than our own hopes, and greater interests to forward than our own interests. The good of the swarm is the good of the bee, we all know."

"That's sense," she said. "And here's sense for yours. Them that can't help, needn't hinder. I'm as reasonable a woman and mother as you're likely to find in Kent, or out of it, and so I tell you that. Of course I can't ask you to go to the girl and say, 'Marry Nicholas,' when all the time you want to say 'Marry me.' I'm a woman myself, and more heart than head always, worse luck for myself; and some day, when it's too late, you'll know the mother you had. But I can say your duty—however, no need to tell you your duty. You've shown me you know it. 'Tis the Crowns hive that matters, not the Crowns bee, and if you see that much, then a fair-minded man like you will see all the rest. Kiss me; and come over to-morrow. Don't let days go and you keep away. You're my right hand, and well you know it. And I'd lay down my life for you to-morrow."

"Never was such a mother."

She looked into his eyes and left him. Then the gate fell to and he went back through the orchard, and she glanced round at him. And seeing his great body amongst his damson trees, with hands in pockets and head down,

something seemed to leap at her heart suddenly, and a veil lifted from her eyes. While he wandered away, impressed with a curious sense that he himself had ceased to be a real man at all, his mother hesitated, half in a mood to return to him. But she did not: she went back to Hill Crest, and came straight upon Nicholas sitting in the parlour alone. He was smoking and dejected.

"Where have you been?" he asked, but not as though he wanted to know.

"With Nat."

"Lucky devil—he'll never fret his heart to fiddlestrings over—I say, mother, she's chucked me—Rosa May. I can't keep it from you, but you needn't tell anybody else. Somehow I thought—— And yesterday I offered and got turned down. But I wouldn't believe it was final—simply wouldn't. And I said to myself, 'I'll just let it rest for a month, and go on as before, and give her time to think about it. And that would have been the right thing, no doubt; but when she was here, walking down to the hop-gardens with me just now—— I'm such a damned fool. Instead of doing what I intended, I must needs run my head into it again. How the devil can a man help it if he's in love? I ought to have gone away and not seen her for a month. Now I've got 'no' again. I shall clear out. I'm not beat. Third time's lucky. What would you do about it? She's such a kid, she doesn't know what it would be to marry me. She doesn't know her own mind, I swear. And I feel there ought to be some way of giving me a hand. Nobody else can influence her, of course; I don't mean that. But you and Jenny, and even Nat—she thinks a lot of Nat."

"And he thinks a lot of her seemingly," said Mrs. Crowns. "I'm sorry—I'm sorry for a lot of things. Life's all upside down for the minute and wants a firm hand. I'm a good deal torn in half."

"Why? You haven't changed about her and me, I suppose? You know that I'm the man for her, and so

does her father, and so shall she. One wrong step may wreck the show. I oughtn't to have tackled her again to-day; and yet I'm not sorry I did, come to think of it. It'll show her I didn't take her 'no' for an answer, and don't mean to. I'll fight for her. All's fair in love. I've a damned good mind to tell Nat about it. He's helped me over many a stile before to-day. Why should I hide it from him anyway? My good's his good, as he's said often enough."

"He knows."

"How? You've told him. Well, so much the better. I'll go and see him, mother."

"You can't do that. You must keep clear of him, Nicholas. It's one of those things—well, he knows, and so must you. Nat's in love with Rosa May himself. Did you ever?"

"Old Nat!"

"Only two years older than you. He reminded me of that. Not that I'd forget it, God knows. That's why I say life's upside down."

"But—damn it all—what nonsense! A fatherly man like Nat. Surely he's got more sense? He's as bad as Fuggles after Jenny. He couldn't, mother."

"He has, then, and that's all about it. I went to him for you, Nick. I thought, as you said just now, that such a far-seeing, sensible wonder as Nathan would help us—you. I saw at dinner there was a hitch, and so I went straight off to him. He knew long ago that you were after Rosa May."

"He's been playing double about it then."

"'Double'! Nathan play double! Any son of mine play double! You know better. But what could he do?"

"Climb down, I should think. This is all rot, mother, and I won't believe it. You didn't hear him right. Rosa May—a girl like that——!"

"We don't know anything about her, and you'd better not drag her in, Nick. And I can trust my ears if I can't

my heart. I tell you that Nathan loves her—just as much as you do, very likely, and—and—and he's calm about it, and knows all you'd tell him, and all about duty and self-sacrifice, and all the rest of it. And we've all got to be sane now, or else fearful things will overtake us."

"Sane, you call it—to try and cut out his own brother on the quiet?"

"Nicholas, sit down and don't say things you'll be sorry for. This is worse for me than either of you. Understand that—far worse. I went to him all for your sake, and I fought for you like a hen with one chick; and, looking back, I reckon it wasn't too motherly a thing to do either. But I did: I fought him for you. You were uppermost. I'd gone all on your account, and when he told me he loved her too, that didn't make no difference, because I still fought for you."

"And right too. You showed him sense, I suppose?"

"No, I didn't. I showed him I was up for you against him. And he——"

"Well?"

"He took it lying down. Not a hard word, not a swear word even."

"Because he knew you were right and he was wrong."

"How could he know that? I don't know it myself. I did think so when I was with him, but I don't now I'm with you. I was hard to the man. I forgot a lot of things about him—cruel, delicate things that I ought to have minded."

"Bosh! That's all silly stuff, and forgot long ago; and if you can only speak sense and feel sense when you're with him, you'd better go back to him. There's no sentiment about it. He knew I loved her, and he never told me he did know, and—look here—here's a logical cast iron fact: Rosa May doesn't love him, and that's all that matters about it. And he'd better hear it; and he shall hear it to-day."

"How can you say she doesn't love him, Nicholas? All you know is she won't accept you."

"I don't know it," he cried passionately, and banged his fist on the table. "Be sporting, for God's sake, and don't think you can run with the hare and hunt with the hounds, like every woman thinks; because you can't—not with me, anyhow. I don't know she won't accept me, and more do you—or anybody. Because she's said 'no'—what's that? Surely you understand your own sex? I know she *will* accept me and *shall* accept me—that's what I know; and I know she doesn't love Nat, because if she did, she'd have told me so yesterday. Between brothers like us, and knowing what we've been to each other—why, it's sun-clear surely to any living creature?"

"Don't be silly, my son. It's not worthy of you; and don't talk about your mother running with hares and hunting with hounds—that's silly too. You're forgetting yourself—that's what you're doing. Just think a minute, if you can. Suppose she loved Nathan?"

"I won't suppose it. And if you're his side, you'd better go to him. I won't have an enemy in my own house, mother. I won't suppose she loves Nathan, because it's an idiotic thing to suppose. Where's your imagination? Think of them together! I won't suppose it. Haven't I heard her own father on the subject? He wouldn't dream of her marrying a—I don't say she loves me, but Nathan—if you hadn't judged her character better than that——"

"No need to shout me down, my precious boy. Noise never won an argument. I don't say she is in love with Nat; but I do say that if she was, you'd be the last to know it. It's you are losing your wits to be rude to me and tell me to go to Nathan. If Rosa May loves your brother, how the mischief could she tell you so before she knows whether he loves her? Don't storm and fuss as if you were hysterical, Nick, but just ask yourself that question. I don't say she loves him—I only say he loves her; but——"

"How d'you know he hasn't asked her and got chucked too?"

Mrs. Crowns gasped and grew red. She jumped to her feet and lost her temper.

"Get out of my sight!" she said. "You to ballyrag me, and bawl, and hit the table, and treat me as if I was a criminal in a court of law, and you a beastly lawyer convicting me out of my own mouth—you, to talk to me as never a man, from your father downwards, ever dared to talk before! It's too much. Go about your business, and don't you ever look at me like that, or speak in that tone of voice to me again as long as I live, or I'll—I'll make a stir about it."

"All right," he answered. "I know where I am now. And you'll rue this, mother. I forgive you, all the same. D'you understand that. I forgive you!"

During her moment of speechlessness that followed, Nicholas Crowns took himself off, and when Jenny came in at tea-time, an hour later, she found her mother still sitting in the parlour weeping.

She stared with amazement.

"Good powers! What is it?" she exclaimed, hastening to her parent's side. "You haven't done that since father died!"

"I'm crying because I'm dead myself," declared Georgina. "Yes, I am—my thinking parts are all perished. My brains are rattling in my head like a last year's walnut. If anybody had ever told me there was a time coming when I should break my golden rule and give up minding my own business—— But I'm punished; and I'm not the first mother who's made a fool of herself over a son, Jenny; and I shan't be the last. Cold comfort that; but it's all I've got for the minute."

"Tell me."

"I've told enough. You'd better brew the tea strong. I'm weak as a rat. You're all the same—all three of you. You've all waited till you've grown up to turn my hair grey; but now you're doing it so fast as you can; and if I haven't got the gout to-morrow, you needn't thank

Nicholas. However, he's forgiven me, for trying to talk sense to him—that's something. Forgiven me! And God's my judge, I'll beg his pardon for bringing him into the world next time I see him; and you too; and Nathan too. That's a thing many parents ought to do, no doubt; but I never thought I should be one of them."

"Come to tea and dry your dear eyes," said Jenny. "I never heard such talk as this in all my life. What's happened to everybody?"

CHAPTER XXIII

THE OASTS

SIX HUNDRED hills of hops were thrown down and picked in a day, and after a week the gardens had changed their aspect. Now the stripped spaces yawned and showed the pickers in full force. The bare, hot weald stared to the edge of the green, and upon it lay withered piles of bine and heaps of fallen poles. Here and there, stranded like islands on the waste, still stood a solitary male hop which the pole-pullers in the business of feeding the hungry bins had not troubled to fell. The rows of the folk might now be seen flung through the opened gardens. They were clustered in groups, and, above them, large umbrellas—rusty black and green and blue—broke the line, while here and there a girl's sunbonnet, or a child as bright as a butterfly, made a flash of colour in the scattered harmony. But blue and green were the prevailing tones that sharply splashed the foreground, and faded away to dots and smudges where the hop aisles still stood misting into distance of hot haze and sunshine. The drone of many voices died down the lines—staccato, and punctured with laughter at hand, sinking to a murmur, no louder than hum of bees, as they receded. Glory of light was on the gardens and heat of noon. Many old heads were drowsy; many little children lay curled up or sprawling fast asleep in patches of shadow.

From time to time yellow bags on men's shoulders emerged from the lines, and now two girls, anticipating the dinner whistle, approached a waggon that bore the bags up the hill and won a lift to the hop oasts.

The great chambers, cool enough as a rule, were cool no

more; but their eternal twilight offered a rest to the eyes. Into two parts was each divided, and twelve feet above their ground level opened the drying chambers on transparent floors of horsehair. Above, the domed roof faded and narrowed to the cowl; while beneath, there stood open ovens built of brick. Looking down through the hair, the red eyes of burning anthracite and charcoal might be seen glimmering up through the gloom, and the dry, rolled brimstone, that Eli Samson piled upon them, shot the fierce glow with violet flame and dribbled liquid fire. A genial warmth ascended to salute the legs of those aloft; but now came fresh loads, and the hop-dryer, clambering to the hair floor, began to empty fresh sacks upon it. Susan and Milly Daynes, who had come from the gardens to eat their dinner with their uncle, lent a hand now, and soon fresh hops were spread over the floor of an empty oast and massed upon it to the depth of a foot. With a mighty rake Eli turned the hops upon the hair, wading knee deep through the mass to do so. Sack after sack was poured out, and the old man ploughed this way and that in the heat, puffing and blowing, until all was spread fairly, and a layer fifteen inches deep covered the drying chamber. The glory of the hops had vanished, their jade green loveliness looked wan and dim in the shadowy oast; the level mass of them was touched with dark points, where the little leaves stripped away with each cluster littered their surface.

In five minutes began the transformation, and a heavy, visible steam—a vapour rich and drowsy—began to rise. The reek wound upwards, and promised presently to fill the vault overhead. Thence it would emerge from the cowl and stream away to fling its fragrance on the air.

Then Mr. Samson, shutting the door, left the green carpet to dry and shrink and yield its nature for twelve hours to the smokeless fire below.

Without the drying chamber and level with it there spread the wide floors of the cooling room, whereon the

dried hops would presently emerge. Now Eli descended from aloft, by a flight of wooden stairs outside the building. Then he burrowed into the darkness beneath, fed the ovens with more brimstone to enrich the colour of the crop, and so, climbing to the upper floor again, was ready for his dinner.

The old man and the maidens sat upon sacks, opened their baskets, and ate and drank very heartily. Their talk was of the doings of their clan. Mr. Brunger, Milly's sweetheart, had been to see Mrs. Daynes, at Tenterden, when he was exercising the hounds, and he considered that he had made a good impression upon her.

"We shall be married after next season," said Milly; "it's all settled and a house in sight."

"If Ernest don't break his neck 'twixt then and now," added her uncle. "And what's this I hear of Johnny Hook? Chucked another girl, so Swadling was telling."

"So he has, and Nina Dunk was the girl. And she don't know her luck, seemingly, but what does he care? He can always give you one better with his tongue than you can give him."

"And he knows how to get round you too," declared Susan. "If he wants to find the blind side of any girl who's picking, he goes light with the bushel measure and shakes it up shameful. A proper robber to his master."

"He'll be found out some day," foretold her uncle, "and then Crowns will sack him, and no great loss."

A man lumbered up the steps and joined them. It was Henry Honeysett, bringing a message for Eli from Bugle. They greeted him with friendship, for Susan, after her tentative efforts to win Henry's heart, though at first annoyed at her failure, now, through the mists of time, had forgiven, and still regarded him romantically. She remembered very well all that he had told her about Nina.

"You'd be interested in what we was talking about, Henry," she said. "No doubt it put new hope into you when Hook threw over that girl? Or have you changed in the meantime?"

Mr. Honeysett regarded her uneasily.

"You're among friends; you know that," she said.

"It's a mighty tender subject," he confessed, "and I don't mind mentioning among friends, as you say, that I've got a good bit on my mind. In fact, I think of little else for the minute. I was going to put it to Eli if he had been alone."

"You needn't mind us," answered Milly. "We're no friends of Johnny's."

"It's like this," explained Henry. "I've got a great feeling to work a revenge on Hook for his treatment of Nina Dunk. Because he's flouted decency and common honesty and truth and all that, and he ought to be made to smart to the marrow in his worthless bones. And there's nobody interested enough on the subject to want to do it, though everybody agrees it ought to be done."

"So it ought," said Milly. "If a man had treated me like that, I wouldn't rest till I'd got another man to break his jaw for him, if not his neck."

"A very rightful feeling," confessed Mr. Honeysett, "and I happen to know Miss Dunk—Nina in fact—feels the same. Because it was a most shameful wrong-doing. He was after her for her aunt's money, and when the old lady, with her great cunning, let him know the very hour before the downfall that Nina wouldn't have a penny if she married him, then Hook changed his mind and let her wait all night in the hops, and never even took the trouble to tell her till next morning. So, naturally, she's properly sore on the subject, and feeling as I do to her, and being filled now with new hope—I say this in secret among friends—being like that, it's a good deal borne in upon me I ought to show her how fierce I feel against Hook."

"Well, why don't you?" asked Susan.

"That's where my trouble lies," explained Henry. "In nature you might think I'd be all for paying the man out, and making him smart to his dying day when he remembered how he treated her and what he got for it from me;

but against that is the feeling that by chucking her he has done me a wonderful good turn. Which he has done, because now there's new hopes where I'd thought all was lost. And you can't feel in much of a righteous rage against a man if he's done you a service—the best possible, you may say. It's a very curious affair, and quite outside anything as I've ever heard happening to any other man. And I should think it a very friendly act if you clever people would give me your opinion of what I ought to do about it."

"Better ask Nina herself," suggested Milly. "It ain't for you to go examining your feelings so fine, or else you'll end by being left again. If I was Nina Dunk, and I'd been treated that way, and I knew another man, who said he cared for me, was feeling friendly to Johnny Hook on his own account, I'd say, 'Take your beastly friendship to him then, and don't call yourself *my* friend.'"

"That's right," said Mr. Samson. "And if you haven't got the mind to see that, Henry, you ought to be locked up."

The round eyes of Mr. Honeysett turned to Eli. "Do you really think so?" he asked.

"Why—good Lord Almighty—who could think different but a zany? Here the girl you're after has been treated proper wicked by a worthless, heartless young scamp, who never wanted her, but only her money, and you say you love the girl, and yet your mind—so to call it—is in such a proper muddle you feel friendly to the man."

"I thought it was a sign as I had a very open and honest sort of mind," explained Henry; "surely 'tis a great sign of strength of mind to look all round a man?"

"You're either a coward, or else you're as cold-blooded as a blind worm," answered Eli. "Why, old as I am, for two pins I'd trounce Hook myself—not because I care twopence about anybody in the story, but just for the sake of justice in general. And you, with an axe to grind, think twice and again, and look all round him!"

"And no doubt Nina's looking all round you," said Susan rather spitefully. "And after she's looked, she'll decide you ain't worth your shoe-leather—not to her; though I dare say you'll be a very good friend for Hook."

Henry mopped his brow, and his jaws worked. It seemed that he was forcing his mind to alter its estimates of Mr. Hook.

"I see your point," he said. "You speak plain. It was a sort of natural feeling of gratitude to Johnny that he'd gone out of my path, if you understand me. But don't you think I hadn't looked at the other side. It was just a question in my mind how far I should go. He's been very rude to me many a time, for that matter. And if you think I ought to put it across him, then I certainly will do so. I can't fight the man, because I'm three stone heavier and could kill him in a scrap; but of course I can show him up and revenge Nina upon him in a gentlemanly sort of way. Perhaps you'll tell me how."

"Ask Nina," said Milly. "What you've got to do is to please her, I should think—not us. Any other man in the world would tackle Johnny first and go to her afterwards; but as you find yourself so wonderful open-minded about it, you'd best to see what she feels."

"And if you don't do what she tells you, it'll be 'good-bye' to her," added Susan. At heart she was glad that her dreams concerning Henry had come to nothing. She regarded him now with considerable contempt. Such amazing impartiality disgusted her.

Her uncle evidently shared her emotion. He rose now, heaved up his huge bulk, and prepared to return to work.

"In my judgment, Henry," he said, "you'll do well to give up this racket and bide a bachelor. You're too peaceful for any woman ever I heard about—and too just. They don't like justice—not for their enemies. It don't suit 'em. There's times and seasons for holding the balance true, and if you're so remarkable fair-minded you'll never satisfy a female. When a man's married, he's got to take

sides with his wife, and if he don't, he'll very soon find, if she's a good-looking woman, somebody else do. And if, as a lover—I suppose you call yourself a lover—if, as young Nina's lover, you can't see with her, and feel with her, and smart with her at such a time as this—then God help the show if she takes you."

"I'll spur myself," promised Mr. Honeysett. "I'll tighten up. I'm greatly obliged to you people. It's a case for action without a doubt. There's nothing like going to clever folk for advice. I mean well, but I've got a slow mind. However, don't you think I've wasted your time. I may be slow, but I'm terrible sure. Let me see my duty, and I do it like a steam-roller. Everybody will tell you that."

"You go over Hook like a steam-roller, then," said Susan. "Just leave enough of the man to be sorry he's born, and no more."

"I'll turn it round in my mind," promised Henry. "There's a thousand things I might do. But don't you fear I'll not do the right one. No doubt my doings will out at the appointed time."

He departed, and Eli Samson and his nieces spoke without admiration of him when he had gone.

Then the second oast had to be emptied, and the hop-drier threw open the door of it to fetch the contents on to the floor of the cooling chamber, while Milly and Susan returned to their picking.

Now were the hops transformed. Their fatness and nature had sped away on feathers of steam into the sunshine that gave them. They rustled crisply; their weight had been reduced by half; their heavy perfume was changed to an odour tonic and sharp. With his rake the old man dragged the hops into honey-coloured, rustling mounds, and the breeze from the doorway set their flakes dancing. In the floor was a hole where the hop-bags hung for packing, and now with his scoppit—a great wooden spade—Eli began to load up a sack seven feet high. It was suspended

at the mouth of a press, and into it he scooped the desiccated hops, and drove them home with the iron face of the press. In a cloud through the floor tumbled the hops, and the air, escaping and gusting up, lifted a little fountain of dust and dry petals. Then the press grunted and stamped the great pocket full under its iron foot.

One hundredweight and three quarters, said the scales—more than sufficient—and Mr. Samson, who by custom of hop-lore received a shilling for every pocket filled, determined that the next should not be quite so heavy. Then the great sack, hard as a board, and crammed to bursting, was sewed up, and the sign of Mr. Crowns—the rampant horse of Kent—stencilled in a bold, black design upon its side.

Here Eli's work ended. For the rest, he only knew that the pockets went to London by the hundred, and were sold at the Hop Exchange. The part they played at the breweries, when hops met malt and turned to beer, he neither knew nor cared.

CHAPTER XXIV

MR. WITHERDEN AS FATHER

CANUTE WITHERDEN devoted some thought at this season to his daughter. Failing a better match, he had decided that Nicholas Crowns would make a very good husband for her; but he had gathered that she did not agree with him, and set himself to find the reason why. He soon discovered that Rosa May cared for Nathan Pomfret, and he believed that his duty must determine him, once and for all, to shatter this dream. Knowing her, Mr. Witherden left her alone, because he understood that it would be quite impossible to change her mind at his will; but he told himself that circumstances from without might arise to make her change her mind, and he considered himself quite justified in creating those circumstances.

He gathered that Rosa May had seen but little of Nicholas in the hop-gardens during the past week, and that the hop-master was now gone to London with his first samples. This much Canute's daughter had learned from Jenny. The opportunity was therefore good, and Mr. Witherden, making his excuse a matter of business, wrote to Nathan and invited himself to tea at Bugle.

Pomfret agreed and bade him come. Mrs. Ledger served the meal, and having eaten and drunk, Canute prepared his plot.

"I shall walk home with my daughter presently," he said; "but we have an hour before we need start to meet her."

"Let's get to business then. It's time I insured my life," answered Nathan; but though Mr. Witherden opened his little black bag and took a parcel of papers therefrom, he showed no immediate desire to discuss life insurance.

"Before we begin," he answered, "there's something else. One never loses by plain speaking, Mr. Pomfret—at least, that is my experience; and if I see a fellow-creature unwittingly putting another fellow-creature to pain, I have always felt it my duty to intervene. What think you?"

"Certainly, if you can do any good by speaking. A lot of painful things—hideous things happen. We're on the brink of war with Germany at this moment, and if that falls out, the whole wide world will soon be in pain—worse than pain."

"No need to take gigantic views of that sort. There will be no war. Diplomacy will find a way. A man doesn't stultify his whole career at a breath—I mean the Emperor of Germany. He has no honest quarrel with France, or with us. Russia will overawe Austria, and the matter of Serbia will be submitted to arbitration. Then we may possibly learn who really was responsible for the murder of the Archduke. It is all quite clear to me—merely a matter of human reason."

"If human reason ever yet settled a row between nations, I'd be as hopeful as you," answered Pomfret; "but when did you find reason controlling a big argument between States?"

"I'm glad you mention reason," answered Mr. Witherden. "Because, like yourself, I always base every argument on reason. You are eminently reasonable—so am I. We are both reasonable men, and also logical. Therefore, what I am going to say—in the profoundest confidence, Pomfret—will win your attention. Pain is being given to a young, innocent creature by one of the kindest and most honourable men it has been my good fortune to meet. And I am involved—deeply. In a word, the sufferer is Rosa May."

"Speak out," answered Pomfret, after a pause; but though the interval was brief, a thousand thoughts flashed through his mind. Was it possible that Witherden, after all, put Rosa May's happiness **higher** than his own ambitions

for her future? Canute had specifically assured Nathan that he rated Nicholas very high, and held him a good husband for any girl in his own position; but now it seemed as though he knew that Nicholas had proposed and been refused. Could it be then that, by persisting, Nicholas was giving Rosa May pain, and her father regretted it? But how was it possible for Nathan to take any step in a situation that found himself so vitally interested? He considered every possibility but the right one.

"Speak out, neighbour," he said. "Speak out, if this concerns me; though, it may be beyond my power to help you. There's a thought in my mind, and if it's the thought in your mind, too, then we'd better change the subject. For I can't do anything there."

"You surprise me," answered the other. "If in this matter your conscience already pricks up its ears, Pomfret, then, far from changing the subject, I am sure you will want to continue it. It does concern you, and you have it in your power to help me. Not that I matter. I'm nobody but Rosa May's father, and the paternal bond, whatever such old-fashioned people as myself may think of it, is not in any sense sacred or significant in the eyes of the rising generation. I'll be plain, my dear sir, and if I cause you pain, you must remember this: I am doing what I regard as my duty. I may be mistaken: I often am; and if you think so, it will be your duty to tell me so. But you won't think me mistaken. That's where your reason will come in. To those like yourself, who put reason first, personal emotions and interests sink into a subordinate position seen in the piercing ray of truth."

"The truth being——?"

"The truth being, that while you honour my daughter with your affection, she cannot return it. Her heart, my valued friend, is gone. She loves Mr. Nicholas Crowns. She has, I admit, refused him—through simple maiden modesty. He swept upon her like an avalanche, so I learn, and she was frightened. But presently, when she

has had time to reflect—you understand. She will be braver next time. It is a case of love at first sight—one of those inevitable things—a marriage made in heaven. It follows, of course, that the honour you would do her—you see? And the consciousness that you are not aware of the truth and that she cannot tell you the truth—until your—Mr. Crowns speaks again, is naturally giving her acute discomfort. So I read the situation, and unless I was very certain that I read it aright, I should not have whispered this delicate confidence. You know me well enough to know that. A man of my sensibilities has gone through a good deal before he could speak so plainly. I, too, have suffered; but I felt, as I say, the situation had become intolerable—that in fact it was not just or fair to you to hide it from you any longer.”

A trivial incident came uppermost in Nathan’s mind and he mentioned it.

“I was going to take her to see Romney Marsh,” he said. “We were going to lunch in the open air.”

“I know. She conceals nothing from me—or from anybody. You appreciate her nature. By all means take her to see Romney Marsh—if you can’t think of any more attractive spot. I have the most complete confidence in you—so has she. The mere fact that it was impossible for her to communicate frankly with you is what has so much distressed her. I don’t suggest impossibilities. In fact I don’t suggest anything. I have merely acquainted you with the facts, which was due to you. From anybody but a father it would have been impertinent and officious. But not from me. You absolve me? For my own peace of mind I should be glad to hear that you absolve me.”

“It goes without saying, Mr. Witherden. We won’t talk about it. There’s nothing for me to say.”

“It is the rarest wisdom to say nothing when there’s nothing to say. Few rise to such a height. You are a philosopher. Shall we leave the insurance business until another occasion? No! Then read these various schemes

at your leisure, and decide which appeals to you most. Life insurance is a gamble. Speaking, of course, roughly, if you die, you win; if you live, you lose. You are a marrying man, and it is to the marrying man that Policy No. 4 particularly appeals."

Nathan shook his head.

"I shan't marry."

"Let us go to the hop-gardens, then, or if you are busy I'll go alone. My daughter has been most industrious, it seems, and she would have enjoyed her prolonged picnic exceedingly were it not for the agitation of her mind."

"I won't come just now. I've got some letters to write. Perhaps we'd better chuck the trip to Romney Marsh?"

"That must be as you think best."

Mr. Witherden rose and put his well-shaped hand on Nathan's shoulder.

"I feel this circumstance a good deal more than you may suppose," he said; "and because I have assumed a more or less indifferent—shall I say dry?—attitude, it is not because my emotions are not active. My heart is far from dry, my dear Pomfret. I can look back through the avenues of memory to my own grand passion. When my wife died, I secured a mossy stone from the edge of a wood about a mile and a half out of Canterbury, and set it upon her grave. She had sat on it scores of times with her hand in mine—not only before, but also after marriage. That means much. Upon the stone I wrote a single, pregnant word of three syllables. It was the word 'Beloved.' I tell you these things to convince you that I am a man of rather abnormal feeling. Therefore you know that you have my very deepest sympathy in this disappointment."

Mr. Witherden's eyes were moist, and his voice genuinely unsteady. Pomfret, who still sat on the table, moved away from under Canute's hand.

"That's all right," he said. "Keep dumb about it—that's all. It's a thing—— But you know."

"Not only shall I never mention it," answered the other,

"I shall actually forget it. I have a faculty to forget, or rather a power to banish a subject from the mind. I shall forget this conversation as though it had never taken place. You, however, will not."

"No fear. Good-bye then. If you go this way through the orchard and get over the stile yonder, you'll save a corner, and be at Hill Crest in five minutes. They'll just be knocking off work in the garden."

"I thank you. My bag. Don't betray me, by the way—I mean, by doing anything very drastic and definite all of a moment. Abandon Romney Marsh, by all means, as you suggest: you're probably right there; but look in sometimes. However, a man with your wonderful tact and—and your fine affection for Mr. Crowns—you won't find it difficult. Good-bye, and God bless you."

Mr. Witherden smiled sadly and went off under the damson trees, while Pomfret stood in his yard and watched him go. The spare figure proceeded with bent head and thoughtful mien; he walked pensively and took some time to reach the stile. Then he disappeared; but once out of sight of Bugle, Mr. Witherden brisked up, lifted his head, and vented a hearty expiration of relief.

"What a touch I have!" he thought.

Rosa May and Jenny greeted him as he stalked among the departing hop-pickers. The day had been wet, and the girls were damp and muddy, but cheerful enough. Jenny had touched delicate ground, and Rosa May, conscious that Nicholas was from home, had felt subtly happier. In the morning, too, Nathan had been with them in the gardens for half an hour, and had reminded Rosa May of the promised visit to Romney Marsh. Of late she had seldom seen him, and suffered some doubts and fears in consequence. But, though not as cheerful as usual in her company, on this occasion no cloud appeared to hang over him, and she was consequently in the best of spirits when her father appeared.

He, however, appeared cast down, if not actively queru-

lous. He grumbled at the mud on her frock, and expressed a hope that the hop-picking would soon be at an end.

"It is all very well as a joke," he said, "but a joke that lasts a month and has to be pursued in wet weather as well as fine, soon ceases to be a joke. I have never liked it, and this I say emphatically: it must not occur again."

"How did you get on?"

"My chat with Mr. Pomfret ranged over many subjects, and was very diverting. I like him, but chiefly for his admiration of his brother. By the way, I hear that he will not be taking you to Romney Marsh."

"Not taking me, father? Why, this morning——"

"Circumstances alter cases, my dear. He is very anxious about the war. I assured him the thing is unthinkable, but none the less he expects it to happen. He is morbid about it. He is a good and conscientious man—without the imagination and fire of his brother, Nicholas; but still a worthy man on his own plane."

"Did you stop him going to Romney Marsh, father?"

"I? On the contrary, I begged him to let the entertainment take place on your account. He, however, thought not, and I could not, of course, press it. I have no fear of Mr. Pomfret. He is too wrapped up in his brother's welfare to—— Besides, in the course of our business chat, certain facts concerning his future intentions came to light. One wins confidences as an insurance agent."

"What facts?"

A flat and blank tone of surprise and disappointment was clearly manifested in Rosa May's voice and face.

"To betray confidence is the last thing that I should ever be guilty of," answered Mr. Witherden; "but what he said to me was evidently a premeditated utterance. He may have had his reasons for saying it, or he may not. I cannot tell. Doubtless the fact is well-known in his circle. And it is right that when a bachelor decides to take that line, he should let it be known—for various reasons."

“What line?”

“The line of least resistance. The line of celibacy. Mr. Pomfret will never marry. It shows good sense in one of his social disabilities. No, his interests and pride of birth are centred on his brother. The race of Crowns—he puts the welfare of that race above his own. It is rather like Moses, who was permitted to see the Promised Land, but could never hope to enter it. There is a distinctly pathetic side to the situation of Mr. Pomfret. He is a man you cannot help respecting, for altruism of that sort is quite admirable. I, for one, should dearly like to give him the pure and noble pleasure he is seeking. His brother’s welfare and happiness is more to him than anything in the world. Because, if that be assured, you see, Rosa May, then the prosperity of the Crowns family is assured, and Mr. Pomfret’s happiness with it.”

She did not answer. She was speculating upon the past, and remembering certain flashes and precious sparks of thought in her talks with Nathan Pomfret. From the level cheerfulness of their conversation; from the little jokes and jests and pleasant common grounds of absolute agreement these flashes and sparks—so brief, yet so imperishable—had ascended, like flames above a genial fire; and she remembered them, because it had seemed to her that only one thing could have inspired them.

And in the solitude of a shorn hayfield, not many miles away, Nathan himself sat smoking his pipe and watching the rabbits, and reflecting similarly. Indeed, the minds of man and maid traversed identical scenes and identical memories. Each was asking itself how the situation, as asserted to exist by Mr. Witherden, could be brought into any sort of harmony with the situation as understood to exist by itself. Nathan now knew that Rosa May loved Nicholas; and Rosa May had learned that Nathan found his prime interest and value of life in his father’s family, and had no intention to found one of his own.

As for the man, though puzzled and exceedingly sad,

he saw no reason to doubt his informant, and supposed that his own hopes and dreams had coloured past conversations and invented a growing intimacy with Rosa May which in reality did not exist. He speculated drearily upon the situation, and in his hour of despondent gloom, it looked as though not only his family, but the very stars in their courses were fighting against him. If Rosa May loved Nick—there was an end.

But the girl, trudging by Canute's side, took a different line. She was by no means prepared to accept her father's utterances at their face value. She knew that he wanted her to marry Nicholas Crowns; and she knew that when he wanted a thing to happen, he took very great pains to bring it about, and justified even devious means if success rewarded them. In his business he had sometimes detailed little triumphs of diplomacy which had not met with Rosa May's secret approval. Therefore, from the first shattering blow of these confidences, her spirit began to recover. Her father might be telling the truth—indeed, she knew him well enough to be very certain that in so far as the letter of his words was concerned, he was doing so; but her experience of Mr. Witherden inclined her to hope that things were not in spirit as he had stated them. Indeed, Rosa May, unknown to herself, arrived very near the absolute truth of the situation.

"You are remarkably silent, my dear," said Canute presently, as they approached their home. "What may you be thinking about?"

"I was thinking how wonderful you are, father," said Rosa May.

It was the same idea that had occurred to Mr. Witherden himself, on leaving Bugle Farm, but he felt a little uneasy—not so much at the praise in his daughter's mind, as at the tone of voice in which she announced it.

CHAPTER XXV

JENNY AND ROSA MAY

ENGLAND was at war with Germany, and the country began, very slowly, to grasp that tremendous fact. From the metropolis to the least hamlet the nation's pulses quickened until the event had reached the most sluggard heart. To trace its far-reaching significance, to show how it rent old values and tore the veil of the nation's soul from top to bottom, is no part of this story, whose end alone comes within the vortex. As yet the civilian manhood of the State had received no direction. All was confusion, and troop trains began to thunder to the sea; but the ultimate order out of the confusion, the huge business of organising a kingdom at peace into a kingdom at war, had not been accomplished. None yet deemed that it would be necessary, or that England was opposed to an enemy who could not be defeated by her customary methods of warfare.

Hill Crest hops continued to be garnered, and on the day when it was known that war had been declared against Germany, Jenny Crowns found that a constraint and reticence of late growing up between Rosa May and herself could no longer be endured. They began to work as usual, and after vague fears concerning the war and its issues, Jenny spoke.

"It's not a time for silence and silliness, anyway," she said, "and it's not a time for anything to come between friends. So if I'm not myself, I tell you, Rosa May, it's not because of Germany, but because of you. You're not yourself either, and you haven't been for ages. We fence about and—look here, tell me. I know partly—or

I think I do. But tell me. Is it anything to do with my blessed brothers? And don't think I take sides, or anything like that. I'm very fond of them both. But perhaps you can't be that."

"Yes, I can," said Rosa May.

"Well, if you are, then what's the matter? It's all so small at a time like this."

"To you, yes. Not to me. I'm glad you've begun about it, though you can't do anything. But—well—Nicholas asked me to marry him."

"I know that. He told mother."

"He's asked me three times. Twice before he went away, and once since he came back."

"He's gone to London again to-day."

"Has he?"

"You've said 'no' three times then. Well, did you mean 'no' three times? But of course you must have. You'd have said 'yes' the first time, if you'd meant 'yes.'"

"I think I should, Jenny. Why not? There seems to be an idea in my father's mind that a girl always begins by saying 'no.' Perhaps they used to when he was young. He assures me that mother said 'no' to him twice. But it is all so weak-minded. I don't love Nicholas—except as a brother."

"Well, you can't help that."

"I don't want to help it. Somehow, it rather outrages me that he could ask three times."

"He's a Crown. They hate taking 'no' for an answer. But he must see it now. I'm frightfully sorry for him, because, of course, you'd be a heavenly wife for him. But what's the good of making a mystery about it and being miserable? He must get over it. No doubt it feels like the end of the world to him for the moment; but if you can't love him, it's no good talking any more about it. He's bound to see that presently. And there'll be plenty to distract him now. He'll go to the war, of course."

"And your mother will say I sent him."

Jenny laughed.

"Good gracious, no! You don't know mother. If either Nick or Nathan hung back, she'd tell the world they were no sons of hers. Nicholas is a soldier already, for that matter. He has worked with the Territorials since they started."

"I'm very glad you forgive me, at any rate" said Rosa May. "I am sure your mother never will."

"There's nothing to forgive. Mother's all right. The war's fairly swallowed her. She's got imagination, and sees what it means clearer than any of us. That only leaves Nat."

"Perhaps the war will swallow him?"

"War's a hungry thing," said Jenny. "It'll swallow every decent Englishman who's in his prime and can stand on two legs and fire off a gun, or work for England at home. But Nat——"

"Of course the war is going to turn everything upside down. Nothing can be the same again."

"Platitudes from you, Rosa May! I'm talking of Nat. You're going to Romney Marsh with him?"

"No, I'm not."

"Why not?"

"He sent a message through my father that very evening. At least it amounted to a message. He's changed his mind."

"Changed his mind between morning and evening? And didn't even come to tell you so himself?"

"The war perhaps."

"Nonsense, Rosa May. We didn't know for certain there was going to be war three days ago."

"It's like this. I can't keep secrets from you—or anybody, for that matter. I'm awfully ashamed. At first I thought it was just father. Because I know what he wants and is determined shall happen. Something that can't happen. Then I threshed it out, and I believe I've discovered the most dreadful thing in the world, Jenny."

"Dreadfuller than the war?"

"For me—yes. The most dreadful thing that could happen. I'll tell you, because you love me, and it will be sacred with you. Oh, Jenny, I believe Nathan thinks I love him."

"You darling! Really?"

"I'm not a darling at all—and he knows it only too well. It's hideous in naked words; but I can tell you, because you are my first and dearest chum—and the only chum I've got in the world."

"This is tremendous," said Jenny. "Calm down and go on picking, and tell me how you know that Nathan can imagine such a mad thing."

Rosa May winced, but did not see Jenny's eyes.

"Because he told father he was never going to marry. And the fearful thought is—not that I care, yet it's fearful—the fearful thing is that, no doubt, he told father to tell me again. So I must have made him imagine I loved him. Could anything fearfuller happen to a woman?"

"Rosa May, this is all moonshine, and I don't believe a word of it," said Jenny. "What you've got to do is to go on just from the place where you left off. And that is at this hop-bin three days ago, when Nat came to talk to us, and reminded you—yes, reminded you about his picnic. I know Nat better than you do, though no doubt you don't think so. But I'm positive that if he'd changed his mind about Romney Marsh, he would have come straight to you, or written straight to you. He could no more have sent a message like that by somebody else, than he could have jumped to Jericho. And why on earth shouldn't he marry—like any other silly man? I don't want to say anything disrespectful about your father; but he certainly didn't understand Nat. You say yourself your father wants you to marry Nicholas. So—so—he may have—not intentionally of course, but——"

"He may," the other admitted. She was pale and agitated. "I hope he did. Oh, Jenny, what ought I to

do ? That a man should dream I'm running after him, and try, gently but firmly, to choke me off. It's a nightmare !"

"Not Nat, or Nick either, would send such a message through a third person. I believe I know what may be happening—knowing Nat. You see he's awfully fond of Nicholas——"

She broke off and reflected a moment. A silence fell between them, while Johnny Hook brought up another pole to the bin. When he was out of earshot Jenny went on:

"Yes, I'll tell you what to do. And you must do it. You must keep your appointment with Nathan. You were to meet him at the cross ways outside Tenterden, and he was going to bring the lunch. Well, keep the appointment."

"But he's not coming."

"I'm positive that if you don't hear from him direct, he will be there—positive certain."

"That means you're going to tell him to go, Jenny."

"No, it doesn't. I promise you faithfully I won't mention the matter to him."

"You think he can be going, despite what he said to my father ?"

"I think that, knowing Nat, he never quite said that to your father. I'm positive there was a misunderstanding. No doubt your father thought he said he wasn't going; but I feel sure he will go. No harm's done by your keeping the appointment, at any rate, and I order you to keep it, Rosa May."

"You promise, on your honour, not to mention the subject to him ?"

"I promise faithfully. You dear ! You've got the funniest expression I've ever seen on your little face."

Rosa May was doubtful.

"What it is to have a friend like you, Jenny ! It seems impossible to talk of such a thing as this, and yet to you I can, and thankfully too. You are a blessed girl."

"You'd do as much for me. And nothing's impossible between friends. Nat's the best man on God's earth—always remember that—absolutely the best. And when a sister praises a brother, you may believe her."

"If you say so, I know it's true. I found it out myself, for that matter."

"You may hear before Saturday that he really isn't going. I don't know anything about it, except that if he isn't going, you'll be told by him."

"I only want him to respect me. And if I knew he did, I should be perfectly happy to the end of my life—even if I never saw him again."

"You little simple dear!" said Jenny. "Don't speak another word—you can't say anything more beautiful and silly than that. Come and talk to the people. I'm tired of picking. Let's go and play with the children."

They visited the little widow with her black brood and others among the folk. Rosa May was in a dream. She followed her friend about like a dog, and kept close to her. Jenny seemed a sacred thing. A feeling of great peace and rest settled upon the younger. She had come to the conclusion that Nathan Pomfret, having sounded her soul and learned her opinions, must find her lacking. He had doubtless guessed that she cared for him, and had chosen her father to let her understand. She had never associated Nathan with Nicholas, or imagined that the elder brother could be influenced by the knowledge that the other wanted her.

As for Jenny, needless to say, she knew all about it, and now was happy in the knowledge.

The time came for departure, and another day was done. The folk streamed off with their perambulators and baggage homeward, and only their litter remained behind them. Still here and there on the great bare spaces a solitary male hop, its inflorescence withered and brown, hung upon a standing pole, forlorn with all his bright companions fallen. As evening shadows fell, these lonely

objects seemed to tower like sentinels that kept guard over a stricken field.

Nina Dunk and her aunt departed together, and Rosa May, her feet lighter than they had been of late, bade them "good-night" as she hastened past. Sarah Dunk spoke of the war, but there was no place for war in Rosa May's heart just then.

"Heedless creature," said Nina, when she was gone. "She don't care if the poor are starved and the Germans come."

At the hill ascending to "Peak," Henry Honeysett met them. He was leading a young black retriever dog on a string.

"Good evening," he said, "here's your dog. I can't speak for his character; but his mother's a very well-thought-upon dog—a gentle dog, as you may say, and yet a wondrous good watch-dog. And so I hope he'll please you. And I beg you'll regard the dog as my gift, Nina."

Miss Dunk grunted, and Nina patted the dog and praised it.

"I like his looks," she said.

"And I may tell you another thing. I'm slow to act——"

"We know that," said Sarah.

"But once fixed in the mind, I go forward. It may be the war that have got in my blood, or it may be my conscience, but so it is, I've decided to take on John Hook and get a proper vengeance out of the man."

"About time," declared Sarah; "and if you'd followed my advice and put the fear of God into him before he did what he did, he'd never have done it."

"Master says," continued Henry with a calm and level voice, "that the nation will soon be wanted to fight Germany, and that there will rise up a cry for men. In that case I shall go, and every time I'm called upon to slay the foe, I shall feel I'm doing it for the ladies at 'Peak.' But first I want to have my conscience clear about Hook, and

I'm glad to say I see my duty in that matter. He's going to suffer."

Nina flushed and Sarah applauded.

"I won't give you no details," he proceeded. "No doubt you'll hear 'em after; but——"

"I want to see you smash the wretch!" cried Nina. "I've a right to, and I'm going to."

"I shan't smash him," replied Henry. "I'm stronger than him, and weigh three stone heavier. I may tell you I've mentioned it in my prayers. And the way has been made clear. Next week charcoal-burning has got to be done, and Beken and Hook will be helping at it between the tallies. I can't yet be sure of the hour, but I shall fix that presently. Anyway I know the place, and when the appointed time arrives, you shall know and be there, Nina."

"It's not for revenge, or any low thing like that," declared Nina; "but I want my self-respect back, and you've got to get it back, Henry, as you promised. But you're that soft-hearted——"

"Not where Hook's concerned. In a general way I may be, I grant, but not in that quarter. Very like, but for the war, I would have spoiled his usefulness for a month of Sundays; but now all's changed, and even a hateful man like him may be wanted to fight against the foe. However, you shall see what I've contrived, and if you don't like it, then I'll have another dash at him after."

Nina nodded.

"And I may add that I'm going to buy a new collar for the dog, when you've fixed on his name. This is only borrowed. And I shall pay for his licence from year to year out of my own pocket," continued Mr. Honeysett.

"Thank you, I'm sure, Henry. What shall we call him, Aunt Sarah?" asked Nina.

"We'll wait and see his nature," answered Miss Dunk. "If he's a good dog, we'll give him a good name; and if he's a bad dog, we'll give him a name to match his badness."

In my experience dogs ain't what they were, and there's more bad about than good. Same with everything, for that matter. That's why the war's sent."

The brown-eyed dog looked up, licked Nina's hand and wagged his tail.

"He wants to be good," she said.

"No doubt," answered Sarah. "We all want to be; but how many of us will take the trouble to work for it—like we do for the other things we want?"

CHAPTER XXVI

THE BISHOP ESCAPES

UPON the world war fell like a thunderbolt, to shake the strong and submerge the weak. For Georgina Crowns it exercised far-reaching effects, and she was caught up in the whirlwind, and shared the common emotions. Seen under this fierce light the affairs of peace dwindled in their proportions, for war suspended a thousand lesser interests, and many matters that were bound to advance upon their way, despite such terrific intervention, changed their colour and bated their immediate significance. It is fair to say that Mrs. Crowns still recognized that the paramount interest in the life of both her sons must be the future of Rosa May; but she believed that any solution of the great problem should now be indefinitely put off for an uncertain period; she did not guess that even war with Germany would bulk in lovers' eyes as a matter less vital than understanding with the loved one. For herself, the future wife of Nicholas or Nathan mattered nothing now, before the more immediate future of both Nicholas and Nathan themselves. Rosa May became a shadow, and when, as presently happened, she found that in the eyes of her sons the girl still bulked larger than the issue of the war, she was indignant.

For her, the fact that both must join the colours dominated all lesser facts. She took it for granted. The question was not even debated with Jenny. Mother and daughter alike knew that both men would go, and had either declared any other intention, their mother would have been the first to cry her indignation. But if she

spoke with pride and enthusiasm by day, tears often dewed her nightly pillow.

She learned that Nicholas put Rosa May far above warfare, and, despite three refusals, still intended to have an understanding with her before going.

"As like as not the war may be a godsend to me," he told his mother quietly enough, for their quarrel was swiftly healed. "There's a new thing in the air, and women have got to breathe it the same as men. Anyway, I pin my hope to it. War is an eye-opener for everybody, and helps them to see what matters and what don't. She can't play about, anyway; because in my case, as an officer in the 'Terriers,' I may have to go quick and find myself in France by autumn. Old Nat is different. He'll enlist in Kitchener's army and won't be a soldier till next year. It's now or never for me."

"I thought you'd leave all that nonsense about Rosa May till—after," she said.

Nicholas stared. That his mother should have changed her view of his matrimonial plans so completely, amazed him.

"You ought to have known me better then," he answered.

Then Mrs. Crowns began again to think about Nathan. Perhaps he would feel with his brother—in which case something must very swiftly happen. But Nathan did not speak of the matter to anybody, though, in secret, he found himself still much perturbed. He began to consider joining the army and to set his affairs in order; and then he received an urgent message from Mr. Fuggles that Martin desired to see him. It was Jenny who brought the summons, and she insisted so strongly on its importance that he consented to go on the day after receiving it. He did not, of course, suspect that Jenny had anything to do with the matter, or that others beside Canute Witherden could practise secret diplomacy. But so it was, and Jenny, feeling as her brothers felt, that the matter of Rosa May was far more personally pressing than that of the

European war, had chosen to take certain steps. The difficulties were great, but she shifted them to another pair of shoulders, and knowing very well that one existed who would be gratified to do her a service, paid Martin Fuggles a visit and won him for the cause.

When, therefore, Nathan arrived at "The Hydrangeas," he became again the victim of secret diplomacy; but while, in the case of Mr. Witherden, the agent was unfriendly behind a mask of friendship, Mr. Fuggles affected to be inimical, though in reality zealous to do Nathan a good turn if he possibly could. But first he had to pretend an object for so urgent an invitation, and after their greetings the visitor gave Martin an excellent opportunity to do so.

"How's the campaign going with the bishop?" he asked.

"Ended in my defeat," answered Mr. Fuggles. "And I feel it so much that I had to beg you to come while I'm smarting and vanquished. My pleading with one of the most eminent prelates in the Church of England for mercy for the child born out of wedlock has ignominiously failed. The sequel is rather illuminating, Pomfret, for it shows the impossibility of winning either sympathy, or understanding, from the Anglo-Saxon. You'll remember a remark in my last letter. The bishop wrote to say that I was wrong in supposing everybody wanted justice done for the illegitimate child; and I retorted that I could not believe England desired us to lag behind the rest of the civilised world in such a particular. I made one other point, and he fastened on that. So like them—anything to quibble about—anything to distract attention from the main issue."

Mr. Fuggles took papers from his drawer, where they lay in readiness. "I said in my last, you'll recollect, that the Church had called stoutly for this reform; and in answering me, the bishop ignored the rest of my letter. Not a word about the great question I raised—only this little twopenny halfpenny side issue. Listen attentively, please."

“THE PALACE,
“MAIDSTONE.

“DEAR SIR,

“The Bishop of Maidstone directs me heartily to thank you for your letter, which he has read with great interest. He would now be much obliged if you can kindly tell him to what, exactly, you allude when you say, ‘the Church has called so stoutly for this reform.’

“I am,

“Yours faithfully,

“THOMAS FOTHERINGAY.

“(Chaplain.)”

Mr. Fuggles shrugged his shoulders.

“So much for episcopal light and leading. I’ve given him my references, of course, and told him how the barons refused the proposals of the prelates in 1236, to make the law of England chime with the civil and canon law on the subject of the child born before wedlock. I cited pages and columns in the ‘Encyclopædia Britannica,’ and referred him to contemporary works on the subject, all showing how the Church deplored this outrage. The Senior Christian Church, of course, as there was no English Church at that date.”

“What did he say?”

“Nothing. He has dropped it. He did not answer my letter—did not even acknowledge it. We are left, therefore, to suppose that the Church of England approves this situation, despite the fact that practically the whole of Europe and America and the British Colonies accept subsequent legitimation in the spirit of decency and humanity. It is, of course, the very backbone of the crusade against infantile mortality; but my bishop will not lift his holy finger to advance it. And now—now the greatest war the world has ever known is upon us, Pomfret, and I can assure you that a year hence, human babies, illegitimate or otherwise, will be one of the most debated subjects in the councils of men.”

“Something may be done then,” suggested Nathan.

"Possibly. The Church and the Law will not take the initiative, however. Neither will do this bare justice of its own free will. They must be driven by something far greater than themselves; the spirit of human mercy and the inspiration of the Supreme Being. I'm going to approach another famous man now—one who's neither parson nor lawyer—and see if he'll help. Or perhaps I can't do better than leave it to the war. Time, at any rate, is on our side. Time's always on the side of right, for evolution is an upward tendency—an advance towards better things. How fortunate that is! Yes, I say that even in the face of this coming war. A setback of a century is hard for us who live in that century and will be called to witness it; but the tide continues to come in, Pomfret, and our children's children will see the flow. Ultimate achievement lies with goodness. If that is granted, we've got to be optimists, despite the most dreadful disasters."

"Time works so slow," said Nathan.

"Slowly but surely. Too slowly for us well-meaning, short-lived creatures; but none the less surely. You can't expect a big business like the Universe to do anything in a hurry. But you may always back it to be on the move. Matter cannot stand still; morals cannot stand still; it is only we who watch them from our vanishing standpoint that think nothing's doing."

"There'll be enough doing now," answered the younger. "The wheels of life and death will be sped up a good bit between now and Christmas."

"Mark me," answered Mr. Fuggles, "this is going to be a war between reason and unreason. Germany—to which obedience comes easy—has reached a servile pitch of obedience—unfortunately to bad, if not mad rulers; and for once, though no man believes in the aristocratic principle more than I do—for once an all-powerful aristocracy is going to ruin the kingdom that it controls."

Nathan listened, and, after more war talk, the crafty Mr. Fuggles slipped naturally into his real purpose.

"I shall hear something of the utmost interest to-night, and if you can come in to-morrow—no, by the way, you can't come to-morrow—you're engaged."

The other shook his head.

"I've nothing particular to do."

At this Martin simulated the greatest astonishment.

"What's coming to the young men! Is war a greater thing than—? Forgive me, but if you've forgotten an appointment, Nat, I happen to know that somebody else has not."

"I've no appointment. I had—but——"

"You must not think this an intrusion. It's no business of mine; but since the accident of talk between us has shown there's a misunderstanding, I'd better explain how I happen to know. I must tell you I'm rather friendly with the new people—the Witherdens. Canute—fancy anybody being called Canute! Yet that indirectly shows his father or his mother had ideas—Canute amuses me. He is Anglo-Saxon, but not entirely. He has the qualities of his defects. At any rate he feels as I do—that the loss of our aristocracy is a real loss. You'll see, by the way, that where there's a trickle of Norman blood left, those who possess it will leap to the colours like one man."

"The Witherdens?"

"Yes—especially Miss Witherden. She is a most attractive and charming young creature, and you are a very lucky dog. Perhaps you remember now? She comes to me for books—she and Jenny. And she's full of a great expedition to Romney Marsh to-morrow—with you. She's under the impression that you are going and are taking lunch. On the whole, it's rather a lucky accident this cropped up, for she's a proud young person, and if you had not appeared at the appointed time and told her afterwards, instead, that you had forgotten to come—well, it's just possible that you might have created a very unfavourable impression."

"But I told her father I should not come," said Nathan.

"In that case, either he has not told her, or she, knowing her dear father's diplomatic ways, declined to believe that such a man as she believes you to be would have sent such a message by a third person. At any rate she expects you."

Nathan took a long breath and stared at the placid white face in front of him.

"You're a good friend to me, Martin," he answered. "You helped me before and you've helped me again—though you didn't know this time you were helping me. I'm a good deal knocked over by this business. There's Nicholas, of course, but you convinced me in that matter. A man mustn't force himself where he's not wanted, however. In a word, Nick is the favourite. She's said 'no' so far to him, but she's going to say 'yes' next time."

"And who told you that?"

"The one of all most likely to know. And he told me more than that. Mr. Witherden, I mean. I've failed, and so I must throw up the sponge."

"And to think you're a Kentish man!" exclaimed Mr. Fuggles. "To think a Kentish man, who'll be fighting for England in a minute, can't fight for himself!"

"There's some things a man surely can't do, and nobody knows it better than you, Martin. And one is to force himself on a woman who has made it plain she's got no use for him. I'm not the sort to do that. While there was hope, and when you'd shown me I couldn't stand down for love of my brother, because it isn't possible to make sacrifices that involve another person—Rosa May, I mean—when you had showed me she had to decide and I wasn't helping Nick even if I gave way, then I went ahead and fought all I knew to win her. But truth's truth. When you heard that our Jenny didn't want to wed you, you acted as such a man as you was bound to act; and now I know that Rosa May has got no use for me, I must do the same."

"Good," answered Mr. Fuggles. "All sound reasoning

up to a point. But now I'll ask you a question. Who told me that your sister didn't see her way to accepting me?"

"She did herself."

"Exactly. She didn't send somebody else to do so. And one more question. Did she tell me she wouldn't marry me before I asked her to?"

"Of course not, Martin."

"Then you'll grant the cases aren't on all fours, I should hope. In the first place, you haven't asked Rosa May to marry you—at least I suppose you have not."

"No, I haven't."

"Therefore she couldn't say she wouldn't."

"But she's let me know I'm not wanted."

"That's the first question I put. Did she herself tell you that you weren't wanted, as Jenny told me?"

"Her father did—in a tactful sort of way. He was keen to spare us both."

"He's a charming person, as I tell you. But it's an unfortunate fact that you can't trust most charming people a yard. I'm not merely suggesting that Witherden wants to separate you from Rosa May. I'm saying it quite plainly: he does. But I'll put it to you before he succeeds, whether it might not be worth your while to satisfy yourself that he and his daughter think alike. Of course they may do so. He may have been telling the truth. Still the fact remains, that she thinks you are going to Romney Marsh to-morrow. Perhaps she'll explain to you then that it's going to be the last picnic. On the other hand, perhaps she won't."

"But d'you mean to say a girl's own father——?"

"It may seem absurd to you," answered Mr. Fuggles. "But that's just what I do mean to say. It was quite a common thing in my young days. Parents used to think the welfare of their children in marriage well within their scope—a thing to work for and plot for and even lie for. Mr. Witherden belongs to that archaic order. The highest

motives, you may be sure. But what are other people's motives to a man in love? You were going to give way to your brother first, until I showed you that you couldn't—and now, no doubt, you'll give way to Canute Witherden. But why not give way to the girl for a change?"

Nathan started up.

"To take all this trouble for a damned fool! You're a good man, Martin. And to think—— Just along of believing what other people tell you! There's one thing in justice to Witherden. No, I'm not standing up for him. But I did say, after he'd spoken, that I wouldn't go to Romney Marsh."

"Yes, after he'd spoke. But as his speeches don't appear to have changed his daughter's plans, I should think they wouldn't change yours. No doubt he's kept to the letter of what you said: he'd always be on the windy side of the letter, for the sake of his own credit. Now you go about your business."

Nathan, aglow, stuck forth his hand, but Mr. Fuggles refused to take it.

"No," he said. "I know your shake. My knuckles are not what they were, and if you take my fingers in your present frame of mind I shall have rheumatism in my joints before night, so you can regard it as done."

"And you can regard what I'd say as said," answered the other. "I won't forget. You're a good man."

Then he went on his way, and the elder's smile died from his face as he looked on ahead.

"He forgets the war: but the war won't forget him," thought Mr. Fuggles.

CHAPTER XXVII

NEVER NEW—NEVER OLD

To have described the picnic of Rosa May and Nathan Pomfret at Romney Marsh must have proved a very pleasant interlude—a breath as it were from the past—a peaceful moment of vanished time, while summer still held her place, and the world went very well, with the thunderstorm of war yet hidden beneath the horizon of two minds. But no picnic to Romney Marsh took place. Events moved with such rapidity that, though Rosa May and Nathan started with all due preparation, and set off side by side under a blue sky to their destination, they never reached it. The man, indeed, was perfectly willing to proceed upon the climax of the morning, which overtook them exactly half an hour after their meeting; but the woman, more practical, felt determined to have all clear, and no cloud on the sunset of that momentous day. Ere noon, therefore, they had turned back together, for it was Rosa May's will that the cold luncheon he had brought should be eaten at her home.

They met at the tryst with a shadow for company; but the shadow soon grew thin and vanished, for they were plain speakers, and had suffered enough uncertainty.

"Another fine day. What a huge parcel! One would think we were going to Romney Marsh for a week," said Rosa May.

"I wish we were. It's chiefly bottles—the parcel."

"Then it will be fearfully heavy, for certain. Do let me carry some of it."

"It's nothing—not a weight for my little finger. We

haven't shook hands yet. I'm sorry there was a bit of misunderstanding about this jaunt."

"So was I—very. How did it happen?"

"D'you want to know really? But of course you do. We'll walk a mile or so—to a spot I know by a stream off the road. And then we'll rest, and I'll tell you. It wasn't my fault."

"It wasn't mine."

"I'm not so sure of that, Rosa May."

She was going to answer, but did not. His tone was masterful. Moreover, the brief speech contained a tremendous innovation: he had never called her "Rosa May" before. Reflection on this remarkable fact quite silenced Pomfret's companion. But he, too, said no more, and after they had gone a hundred yards, she found her voice again.

"I like you to call me 'Rosa May,' " she said. "I've often wondered why you didn't."

"I'd call you—I'd call you a lot of other names too."

"Bad ones, I expect, if you think I didn't want to come to-day."

"You've said you did. That's more than enough for me."

"But it wasn't. You said you weren't so sure."

"I only said it. I didn't mean it. I'm in a fix, and you'll have to get me out. I didn't want to drag in anybody else to-day—least of all your father. But——"

"He told me you weren't going to Romney Marsh."

"He misunderstood."

"No, he didn't—Nathan."

"I always wondered how it would sound to hear you say—my name. I'll tell you a funny thing. I never thought you would say it till Mr. Witherden came to see me about insuring my life. Then, though every word he said went through me like a knife, still, in a dreary, idiotic sort of way I found myself thinking, 'She'll have to say it now. She'll have to call me "Nathan" now.' What a fool a man's mind can be—hanging on to some straw

even at the very moment he's falling into a bottomless pit."

"This is all Greek to me, you know," she answered. "What in the world could father have said to make you think I was going to call you 'Nathan'? I should never have done it—never, if you hadn't called me 'Rosa May.'"

"Yes, you would—if what he told me was true."

"Then you must tell me what he told you. You might think I ought to know already; but what I do know makes it puzzling. I can't tell you what I do know, so you need not ask; but I demand to hear what father told you if it was anything unfatherly about me."

"I don't see why I shouldn't tell you. It was nothing unfatherly—quite the reverse, I suppose. He's wrapped up in you. He believes a certain thing. It may be true enough."

"If it's true, I shan't deny it."

"He believes you are in love with my brother, Rosa May."

"He doesn't! He can't! He knows as well as I do that I'm not. And he told you that and—and hinted—oh dear!—how utterly wicked of him!"

"He must have thought so."

"It was impossible for him to have thought so."

"Then the wish was father to the thought. Nicholas suits him. Who doesn't he suit, for that matter?"

"If you're going to begin about Nicholas——"

"I'm not. Nicholas is all right. You know that. And your father——"

"Why did you come to-day if you thought——?"

"I heard you were coming and——"

"Never mind that. I suppose there are some sane people left in the world, even if we are not. Now it's all clear—to me at any rate. And I hope it will be a lesson to you not to believe parents. Never believe parents on the subject of their children. The most honest and respectable parents break down on the subject of their children. The

most trustworthy people come to grief and tell everything and anything but the truth about their children. They can't help it. Parents never understand their own offspring. It's a law of nature."

"Then I'll forgive him. Here's the place. We'll get out of the sun and you shall drink a bottle of lemonade and I'll smoke."

They left the road, and soon found a dingle by a slowly-moving stream that wound under a thicket in the midst of a meadow.

"Half an hour I'll allow, then we must be off again," he said.

But she did not want the lemonade, and he had no thought for his pipe.

"Now we understand each other," he declared. "A fair field and no favour. And yet I want a favour. That's not the word either. I want the whole world. That's to say I want—you."

"Whatever for?" asked Rosa May.

"For ever. I love you, Rosa May!"

"Not half as much as I love you," she said very quietly.

And so it came about that they did not go to Romney Marsh, because, though the weak male still desired it, his betrothed did so no longer.

"We'll go to Romney Marsh a thousand times, or round the world, or to the moon," she promised; "but not until my father knows I'm going to be Mrs. Nathan Pomfret; and not until Jenny knows, and your mother knows. I am not as greedy as you are. I want to share my happiest day in the world with other people. I must. I can't hold it all. There's nobody to tell on Romney Marsh. My own dear, dear lover! Father said he didn't feel very well this morning. We'll go straight home and cure him."

"But——" he said. "It's mixing business with heaven."

She was sitting on his lap at the time.

"No 'buts.' You know I'm right. Father always mixes business with heaven, for that matter. He won't think the worse of us."

"I'm afraid he'll take it hardly."

"No, he won't. Nobody can do worse than his worst. He'll be quite resigned."

"But, Rosa May—don't move your ear—you see, for him—after what he said to me. He'll be awfully embarrassed—he must be."

"I assure you he won't. He'll be too disappointed to feel embarrassed. It's only another drop in his cup of woe. He'll live to bless me. It is a curious thing that if anybody is unspeakably happy, father catches it. That's his best point really. He loves me very much. He can't be miserable for long—not if I'm happier than ever I've been in my life before."

"Are you?"

"Well you know it!"

"It's solemn—it's very solemn—so terrific. To think that a monster of a man like me—— How I dared."

They chattered and looked into each other's eyes for a little longer.

"Come, then," he said. "I'm like you really. I'm very wishful to let those dear to me know my blessed fortune. And my life from this holy day onward is yours—yours, till I draw my last breath."

"And mine," she answered, "long or short, belongs to you, to live for you, and love for you, Nathan. And I wish I was a star, to shine for you, through the darkest night that ever you—no I don't, either. The stars are too far off."

Canute Witherden's indisposition—which he regarded as an affection of the spleen—had not entirely disappeared when his daughter returned to him. He was sitting under his cherry tree reading a newspaper and speculating as to how the war would affect life insurance, when the gate clicked. His runner beans concealed him from the public eye, and he was just about to retreat to the house when, peeping through an outlet of observation, he discovered Rosa May and Nathan.

That the appointment for Romney Marsh should have been kept at all after his efforts to prevent it had caused him some uneasiness; but that now the enterprise had broken down awoke him to acute interest. For a brief moment he was hopeful, but Rosa May's laughter caused dismay.

"I see you, father!" she cried. "You needn't run. It's only Nathan and me."

The words were designed to break the coming blow, and they did so. Mr. Witherden was sufficient diplomatist to gather that all had been lost, but he emerged placid, though pale.

"What has happened?" he asked. "Good-morning, Mr. Pomfret. After all, I fear your expedition has failed."

"No, it hasn't, father—it's been beautifully successful," said Rosa May. "Oh, dearest father, Nathan wants me to marry him! He asked me long, long before we got to Romney Marsh, and I agreed; because he is dearer to me than anything in the world—and you come next, of course, so the moment after I said 'yes,' the next thing was to rush home and tell you! I hope your spleen is better?"

Canute eyed Pomfret doubtfully. He was concerned, but more for his own reputation than for the failure of his plans. Indeed, his first thought was for himself. The man before him must now know that he had lied. But Nathan appeared to bear no malice. He was blushing and grinning. Mr. Witherden assumed an air of hauteur blended with suffering.

"I confess I was not prepared for this," he said. "At one moment I was buried in the pages of our leading journal and racked with humane anguish before the spectacle of what awaits my country——"

"Fancy! We haven't once mentioned the war!" murmured Rosa May.

"At the next," continued her father, disregarding her, "at the next I am suddenly confronted with a family revolution—important enough in itself, and startling

enough in itself, because I had been led to anticipate something exceedingly different."

"Not by me, dearest," said Rosa May.

"I say the violent clash of ideas—the descent to the ridiculous from the sublime—is a very painful descent, especially to one who is far from well," continued Mr. Witherden. "You break in upon exceeding tragic reflections, and I will not disguise from you, Pomfret, that this news, trivial as it may appear against the background of coming events, is none the less a great shock to me."

"Keep on feeling it's trivial, and then it won't hurt you," said Rosa May.

"All sudden surprises are hurtful after a certain age," he answered. "I repeat that I anticipated something quite different. This haste is unseemly."

"There's been no haste," said Nathan. "I'll tell you about it presently. I expect you've been going on a wrong tack, Mr. Witherden. It was perfectly natural that you should."

"Any tack we may take with offspring is almost certain to be wrong," answered Canute.

"Just what I've been telling Nat," declared Rosa May. "Nobody loves me better than you, dear father, and nobody understands me worse."

"This is not a time for flippancy," replied the parent. "To understand a person argues a certain amount of steadfastness of character and consistency in the person understood. I have striven to understand you, Rosa May, as I have striven to educate you, and spared neither my own time nor my hard-earned money in furthering that object. But character is beyond our power to modify. I do not say you have deliberately deceived me as to your intentions, but doubtless owing to a certain flightiness and——"

"No, father," she answered firmly; "that's not fair. I don't mind that it's not fair to me, but I do mind that it isn't fair to Nathan. I never deceived you. I'm not

nearly clever enough to do any such thing, even if I tried."

"Then it must be failing powers on my part," said Mr. Witherden. "My acumen is deserting me. I don't wish to be plaintive or pathetic; I don't court your pity or sympathy; but I say if there has been a break-down of perception on my part——"

"There has not, Mr. Witherden," declared Pomfret. "I understand perfectly well what has happened, if you'll excuse me for saying so, and I want you to understand that I know what was in your mind, sir."

"I hope you don't intend any patronage by that, however," said Canute suspiciously. "I confess that I feel disappointed at what has happened, Pomfret. I tell you that without fear."

"I know it. I knew you would. What you wanted to happen was different; what I wanted to happen has happened. It's for me to show you that a good thing has happened if I can. But first—if Rosa May will leave us for five minutes—I want to clear up a point or two. You know what I mean, Mr. Witherden."

"Give me the lunch," said she, "and I'll arrange it. I'm afraid father won't be able to help us, because of his spleen, but he'll like to see us eat. Make him as happy as you can, Nat."

"It's like this," began Nathan, as soon as Rosa May had left them. "Perhaps you'll sit down here in your easy chair, where you were sitting when this bolt fell from the blue. It's just this. You wanted my brother to marry Rosa May. And a most natural thing it was to wish it. Your opinions, which are shared by lots of other people, made you feel that I was not eligible. I knew you thought so and didn't blame you. You've always been friendly to me, and you've always been clear that in your opinion I laboured under a great handicap. Well, that's the first point, and, loving your girl as I did from the first moment I saw her, I felt that if she shared your views there was an end of my hopes."

“It is enough for me to have an opinion for Rosa May to flout it.”

“Don’t say that, Mr. Witherden. No man ever had a better daughter. But feeling so, there was only one thing for it. I asked her, and I found that, as far as my birth went, there was no objection in her mind to me. She judged me by myself and wasn’t prejudiced by that accident. Then I found that my brother, Nicholas—the best brother ever man had—loved Rosa May too. We’re different—him and me—but we were alike in that. It was a floorer, I can tell you, because I knew, as everybody who knows Nick knew, that Rosa May would have made a glorious wife for him.”

“Surely in that case——?”

“I’m coming to that. It was the next thing. I thought a lot about it, and, not being very clever at secrets, it slipped out. You’d think a man might have seen it for himself, but I didn’t. I was just beginning to fear that I must give up and sacrifice myself, when it was pointed out to me that there would be no sense in doing so, and no advantage to Nicholas.”

“And who pointed that out, might I ask?”

“A very sensible person. For, don’t you see? the whole thing rested with Rosa May. If she’d liked Nicholas, could I have kept them apart? And if she liked me, or anybody else, could Nicholas have changed her?”

“These obvious arguments have often got a flaw in them, I may tell you,” replied Mr. Witherden. “The female mind is by no means built on such a sound and solid foundation as that of the male. Rosa May is essentially feminine, and I have reason to believe that if you had withdrawn from her sphere and your brother had persisted, a time would have come when her affection would have settled upon him. Out of sight, out of mind, is a very common female attitude. And that brings me to myself. I don’t deny that I wanted my daughter to marry Mr. Crowns. It seemed to me an eminently favour-

able match, owing to his conservative opinions, which would have told on Rosa May's unformed ideas. And wishing it, I naturally endeavoured to bring it about. Hence, when with you at Bugle, I permitted myself a certain amount of diplomatic latitude."

"I know it's called that," answered Nathan. "I'm not saying anything about that now."

"And what is truth after all?" asked Mr. Witherden. "The secrets of the human mind are so obscure that often we cannot even know the truth about ourselves, let alone the truth about other people. Therefore, when I said that Rosa May didn't want you to continue your attention, you must not think——"

"My dear sir, leave all that. Who am I to judge you? You did what you believed to be right; and I believed you were right. I wasn't going to Romney Marsh until I heard that Rosa May was going. Then, of course, I saw that you were mistaken. And, finding that she had quite determined never to marry Nicholas, I asked her if she could marry me. And she could. And she's going to. So the past may as well be left to bury itself. I want your friendship, and if I've lost it, then I must try to regain it. Rosa May loves me, and I'm going to be worthy of such a treasure if I can."

"As things have fallen out to-day, you undoubtedly hold the whip hand," admitted the elder. "It is to the good that you understand what I mean about diplomatic latitude, and think no worse of me for having practised it. A smaller mind might have taken a wrong standpoint. So far as I can see, others have also practised secret diplomacy, and somebody—I don't wish to know the name—has always assisted you at crucial moments when I was getting the best of you. Probably, had you been unassisted, my diplomacy might have conquered—to be quite frank."

"Perhaps—unless Rosa May herself—however, the fact is that we're now engaged."

“So I understand.”

“I hope you’ll accept that situation without any after feeling. It had to be—we were of one mind. My only wish and hope is to be a good son-in-law to you, and make you feel your daughter’s happiness is my first thought.”

Canute sighed.

“You can’t say more, things being as they are,” he answered. “I have lost a rubber in the battle of life before to-day, and I have taken defeat in the spirit of a gentleman. You will understand that I am in no sense humiliated, but merely defeated.”

“Don’t even say that. There was never a thought of going counter to your wishes. But I had to know Rosa May’s. Everything depended on that. I’m sure if the positions had been reversed, you would have done as I did. You never forget anything, so no doubt you remember how you felt when you were in love.”

“I do,” answered Mr. Witherden, “but it may surprise you to know that I approached my wife’s father before I laid my heart at her feet. That was the dignified, old-fashioned way. And I’m not going to say that the modern method is better, because I don’t think it is. However, I am punished for clinging to vanished ideals of conduct. No doubt, if I had felt as you did—that Rosa May would marry where she liked, without submitting her predilection to me—no doubt if I had believed that, then I should have spared myself a certain amount of concentrated thought and diplomatic action on her account. Probably, had our Foreign Minister known that Germany meant going to war in any case, he would have spared himself in the same manner. It may be that the whole system of secret diplomacy is outworn. I don’t know. I am far from feeling a bigot about it. I will only ask you one favour, then, in exchange for my daughter’s hand, which I give you under the galling conviction that you would have taken it whether I did or not—I only ask one thing, and that is that you will not bruit it abroad that I intrigued to prevent this betrothal.

I ask that as much for your sake as mine; because my credit is such that did the world know I had not desired Rosa May to marry you, then the world would probably not smile on your union."

"Just so," answered Nathan, "and even if I wanted to mention that part, which I don't, you may be sure I wouldn't mention it. Of course we must have you on our side, Mr. Witherden. It would go far to spoiling all our happiness in the future if we knew that you were always going to be against us."

"You say so," answered Canute, "but the assertion may only be a recourse to secret diplomacy on your part."

"Honestly not. I say it and feel it—and so does your daughter. She'll be an unhappy girl if she can't win you to congratulate her."

"She will be able to speak for herself. With all my faults I am not vindictive. Plenty of opportunities to be vindictive occur in the life of an insurance agent, I may tell you, Nathan Pomfret. But never have I taken advantage of one of them."

Rosa May called from the window.

"You must have done now. Come and eat," she said.

"My mind is full of far-off things," answered her father.

"You had better eat alone—or I should say together. I will stop here. I am in no mood for a meal."

This, however, Rosa May would not permit. Mr. Witherden therefore sat and watched them enjoy their sandwiches and drink their gingerbeer. Their glorious happiness was more than proof against his depression. Indeed, they were too much for him. They pretended to no sorrow for him and quite ignored his little shafts.

"Isn't it enough that we've forgiven you?" cried Rosa May. "We know you meant well, and all the rest of it, and we know you're not the first parent who has come to grief trying to keep a man and woman apart, when they were resolved never to be apart. So we've forgiven you, and you ought to be thankful for it. Can't you treat us in a large spirit and throw up the sponge?"

"Your frankness amounts to indecency, Rosa May," answered the wounded father. "You strip away the coverings of convention and all that is necessary to make the gregarious life of man possible. You leave no room for delicacy."

"Who wants to?" asked she. "It's all this stuffy delicacy that makes half the trouble in the world. It's secrecy, and lying, and hidden reservations, and all the rest of it that are indecent and hateful and a shame—not frankness."

"Look at the war," added Pomfret. "D'you mean to tell me nations want to tear each other's hearts out and shed each other's blood? Would there be wars if there were no secrets hidden from them that have to fight? Secrecy's the most sinister thing in the world, Mr. Witherden; and if secrecy in politics was a penal offence, and no nation allowed its life and liberty to be juggled away behind its back, the world would be purged of a mighty big evil."

"You speak of the war," answered Mr. Witherden. "And if I may venture to ask, what are you going to do about that? I suppose the parent has still the right to learn whether his child is to be considered in the event of her husband taking the field?"

"We kept that off our tongues to-day," answered Nathan. "We felt, somehow, it wasn't the day for it. But we shan't differ on the subject of my duty."

"Or on any other subject," said Rosa May. "We think alike—most beautifully and exactly we think alike. And Nathan will go to the war."

"The question is, will he come back?" asked Canute. His daughter flushed.

"I'm sorry for you, father," she said. "I thought you were made of finer stuff. I told Nathan that you'd share our happiness, out of your kind heart. What has happened to your heart? To think that any father of mine——"

But Pomfret only laughed.

“None can drop gall in the cup to-day. Don’t you fear, Mr. Witherden. Everything will be in order.”

“There are some people in England worth fighting for—not all,” said Rosa May fiercely; whereupon her parent rose and left them.

“Don’t you bother about him—he’s all right,” declared Nathan, when Mr. Witherden had departed. “We shall live to show him that he’s got nothing for a son-in-law that a rational man need worry about. But I’m going home now. You know the worst—I don’t.”

“Your brother?”

“Yes, Nick’s got to hear—poor beggar.”

CHAPTER XXVIII

HENRY'S BEST DAY

IN a croft above Hill Crest half a dozen men were burning charcoal, and while Nathan Pomfret sped homeward from Tenterden on his day of betrothal, their work proceeded. The hop-poles, when valueless in the gardens, are still of service, and now Rupert Swadling, Johnny Hook and others brought up a load to the burners that Eli Samson's ovens might presently be reinforced.

The smouldering pile stood beside a waterhole, and Mr. Billy Beken, released for an hour from tallyman's work, sat beside the pond and watched the labourers.

They were engaged in the amusing task of chaffing Johnny Hook, who had not yet volunteered for the new army.

"One good thing is you'll lose your job, Johnny," said Swadling, who entertained no regard for Hook. "The master won't have no use for you if you don't join. As for me, I'm too old, and I'm thankful to God I am; but if I was not, I should have gone. I've always done my duty and always shall."

"And so shall I," answered Hook. "There's no call for all this running about, like a lot of silly women. Germany will be knocked out by Christmas, if not sooner."

"Trash, that's what you are," declared another man. "Only good for cannon fodder. And if there was many such, it is us, not Germany, would be knocked out, and serve us right."

"What about you then?" asked Hook.

"Me and my brother are both down, and we go next month. And so does Henry Honeysett from Bugle."

"A lot of use he'll be! A knock-kneed worm like him!"

As he spoke Honeysett himself appeared at a gate a hundred yards off and came slowly across the field.

"You tell him he's a knock-kneed worm," said Swadling. "He'll be interested to hear that. He's got something to tell you too, I believe."

"He can say it another time, then. I'm off," answered Johnny; but Swadling knew there was mischief in the air, winked at the younger men, and bade them restrain Mr. Hook. They did so.

"You bide a minute," said they, "and tell Honeysett what you've told us."

Mr. Beken took his pipe out of his mouth and spat into the water.

"Johnny would rather be a live louse than a dead lion, wouldn't you, Johnny? You'd sooner cut a splash among the girls than face the enemy and fight for your country?"

Mr. Honeysett came on without haste, and behind the hedge, unseen, there crept Nina Dunk. She was abreast of the charcoal burners before Henry reached them, and she hid in a thicket behind the pond. Then the head man of Bugle arrived.

"I want to speak to John Hook afore witnesses," he said, "and I've waited my chance, and now it's come."

"So it is," declared Swadling, "and if you want anything to go on with, Hook have just called you a knock-kneed worm."

Henry regarded Hook without anger.

"I am knock-kneed a thought," he confessed, "but the drill sergeant at Biddenden tells me he can soon cure that. He found I was a very fine man in other respects—finer than I thought—and so did the doctor too. I'm all they want for a soldier, anyhow, and I join up next month. But as to being a worm, I deny that afore you witnesses, and I'm going to show John Hook that I'm far ways off a worm."

"Let me go," said Hook. "I'm busy, and so's Swadling. We've got to get back to the gardens. I can't stand here talking to this slack-twisted fool."

"No need for you to talk—I'm going to do the talking," answered Henry. "I mustn't beat you, Hook, because you're a smaller man in all your parts, and it would be improper to do it; but I've got to disgrace you before the eye of the public, and I've thought it out very careful. You can run faster than me, and so I'll ask these chaps to prevent you from running; and when they know how you treated Miss Nina Dunk at the beginning of hop harvest they will be glad to help me."

"You needn't go over that, Henry," said Billy Beken. "We all know all about it. So you can take it as said."

"Very well then. And now I'm going to punish the man. I've thought about it, and decided what I shall do. I'm going to slap his face with the open hand. Not a real hit, you understand, but just a woman's slap; and then I'm going to march him into this muddy pond and keep him in it till he's told us he's properly ashamed of his beastly actions."

Mr. Honeysett spoke quietly and ponderously, without a spark of emotion.

"I may say one more thing," he added. "Of course, if you'd rather fight, John Hook, I can't deny you; but I warn you that if I let loose it may spoil your beauty for a good long time. I don't want to fight anybody but the German soldiers; no more did you ought. But you're in your right to ask for a fight if you would like it better that way."

"If you lay a finger on me I'll have the law of you, Honeysett. God's my judge I will. So I warn you. It's assault, and you'll get a month if not more."

"I've thought of that," answered Henry. "I never do anything in a hurry, Hook, and I'm taking all the chances. If you rebel and seek to get back on me, I may have to pay forty shillings and go to prison for a calendar month."

That's the law, and I'm quite ready to agree. No man will ever catch me falling out with the law of the land, I promise you."

"Don't jaw; go on and smack his face and put him in the water," said one of the younger men. "A sheep fell in and died there last week, so it's just the place for this chap."

Mr. Honeysett cast a glance at the hedge, and then, with less emotion than a lizard, smote Johnny on his right cheek and on his left. The blows were with an open hand, but exceedingly hard, and nearly knocked the victim down.

"Now walk in the water till I tell you to stop," he commanded.

Hook hesitated as to whether he might with success fly at his persecutor; but he knew it vain.

"You're a coward and a bully," he said, "and I hope a German bullet will go through your ugly head before you're much older."

"Walk in the water," answered Henry.

"I can't swim—I warn you."

"No, you can't swim, or do any other useful thing: we all know that. I'm not wishful to drown you. Go on in."

"There'll be a day of reckoning," said Johnny. Then he entered the pond up to his knees.

"Go on."

Hook turned upon the others.

"Can you men see a harmless chap treated like this?" he shouted.

"We can, Johnny," replied Mr. Beken. "We wouldn't have missed it for money."

"Go on, John Hook," directed Mr. Honeysett.

To his waist went the sufferer.

"I can't go no further," he said. "There's a hole in the middle, and if I get in there I'll drown."

"Go on," answered Henry. "If by chance you go out of your depth, I'll heave you a hop pole to save you. You ain't going to die, but you're going to be a lot more miserable yet afore I've done with you."

Hook, now gasping, advanced yet further. The water rose to his armpits. Then Henry lifted his voice.

"You can come now, Nina," he shouted. "The vengeance is going on very nice, and if there's anybody in Kent at this moment as looks a bigger fool than Hook here, I should like to see him."

Nina appeared, stood by the edge of the water-hole, and regarded her submerged hero. She did not laugh or speak. She merely looked at him.

"Go on," said Honeysett. "Up to your chin, please, John, and you stop there for ten minutes by the watch. You've got your watch on you, Billy. So you can look at it and see 'tis all fair and honest. After that you say you're sorry to Miss Dunk and the vengeance comes to an end."

For ten minutes the unfortunate philanderer was made to stand in a very foul pond with the water at his chin. Neither Mr. Honeysett nor Nina slighted him, or cast an offensive word at him. They stood solemnly together during Mr. Hook's expiation and paid no heed to the rough chaff of the others.

"Time!" said Mr. Beken.

"Now you can come out then, after you've said you're ashamed and sorrowful. And I hope it will be a great lesson to you, John Hook; and if you take my advice, you'll join the army so soon as they'll take you."

"And I say so too," said Nina. "You know what it is to insult a girl now. And no one in these parts is like to treat you civil again, so the sooner you're gone to the war the better."

Hook said he was sorry; he then crawled out of the pond and went straight away at a run for Hill Crest.

"A very useful afternoon's work, Henry," declared Billy Beken. "For why? Because he was a slacker and a shirker both; but now there's only one course open to him—to join the colours. The war might have been made for his comfort, in fact, and before he's dry, he'll know it."

Then Nina and Honeysett departed, and as they went

off a man shouted after them, "You take Henry, Miss Dunk! Can't do better."

"'Tis tea-time," said Mr. Honeysett, "and I hope before you go back to your aunt, you'll come into Bugle and have a drop with Mrs. Ledger and me. And what Alfred bawled just now you heard, Nina. He took the words out of my mouth, you might say. For I was going to put it to you; but I knew my place better till vengeance had been done. But now we're square with Hook, and I ask you whether you can say 'yes.' I shall go to the wars, no doubt, and do my duty with the rest. But it would be a very great thing to know that you had promised to be my wife when I came home."

"I will," she said. "And I'll do more. I'll marry you before you go—just to show what a lot I think of you, Henry."

"Then thank God for all His mercies," answered Mr. Honeysett. "I knew my manners better than to ask you to marry till after, Nina; but seeing you're up for it, then so am I, and before I go to France, it shall be done. And, from what I hear, it will pay you in money, if nothing else."

"You'll fight better for knowing I'm your wife," declared Nina.

Then she kissed him, and they went hand in hand to tell Mrs. Ledger.

"I've had many a damned day in my life and many a tidy day; but never no day like this," declared Mr. Honeysett. "In fact, without straining truth, you may say it's the best day that ever I lived up to the present time."

"You shall have better yet, however," prophesied Nina.

CHAPTER XXIX

MRS. CROWNS AS BELLONA

WHILE Johnny Hook endured these buffets of fortune, certain people converged upon the climax of their experiences. Nathan Pomfret, back from Tenterden and betrothal, climbed the meadow to Hill Crest with purpose to break his great news upon his mother's ear; while elsewhere Nicholas Crowns walked briskly from the railway station to his home. Glancing to the right as he approached, Nathan saw a woman among the orchard trees, where Jenny was picking plums. The damsons had not yet ripened, though their purple under its rich bloom covered the little trees that bore them; but other plums there were, great "Ponder's seedlings" bursting with sweetness, and ready to be plucked. They shone in plump companies among the leaves, and bent the boughs under their weight. Here and there beads of gum, like topaz, had collected where the skin was broken, and from ruined plums there fell sometimes a drunken wasp, who rolled helpless upon the ground.

Seeing his sister, Nathan approached her; but she spoke first, for she had news.

"A telegram from Nicholas. He's going to France at once."

"At once!"

"He'll be home to-day some time, but the main line is all upside down with troop trains. You're back earlier than I expected. Did Rosa May like Romney Marsh?"

"We never got there. We came to an understanding, and then went home and told her father. Oh, Jenny, she's taken me!"

"How glorious! You dear old thing, I am glad—thankful. She loves you fearfully. This is tremendous news."

"It all came like a thunderbolt, Jenny. I feel I've been hanging on the tenterhooks of life for a hundred years. Things happened to make it look hopeless. And yet—all the time—she was caring for me, as never a girl cared for a man before. And we couldn't wait any longer, but wanted to be out with it in her father's ears, and also here."

"How did Mr. Witherden take it?"

"Well, he took it, on the whole, rather badly. Of course it's knocked all his ideas sky high. Now there's mother and Nicholas yet."

"Mother will be all right. That's one blessing of the war, anyway: it's made her feel as if nothing else mattered—even Nick's wife. She's taking a proper high hand about the war. She seems to think that everything calling itself a man must be wearing soldiers' clothes in a week. She was wondering yesterday not whether you'd enlist, but what you'd enlist in; and she's full of an idea about organising women for the land. If she had her way every man would be called for war work up to forty-five years old. She says it's the greatest chance women have had, since Eve, to show what they're good for."

A smudge of khaki appeared among the orchard trees, and a man approached briskly. He did not see them, and was evidently bound for the field path by which Nathan had just returned from Tenterden.

"It's Nick!" said Jenny. "Oh, Nat, you can see what's going to happen. He's off to the Witherdens. He's going to tell them about France next week, and then ask Rosa May——"

Nathan nodded gravely.

"I'd better——"

But Jenny put her hand on his arm.

"Wait a second and think. Might it not be wiser if he went, and then Rosa May can—— Wouldn't he take it easier from her?"

"He might, but what about her? I can't let this painful thing fall upon her. You see that? It's my work. I must stop him."

As he spoke Nicholas caught sight of them. But he did not join them. He waved his hand and shouted:

"See you later. I'll look in to-night, Nat."

A moment afterwards Pomfret had left Jenny and ran to overtake his brother. They disappeared together, and the woman, sighing, went on with her work.

Nicholas had not seen Nathan for some time, and his attitude was guarded, but friendly.

"Can't stop just now," he said. "I meant coming in this evening. We're up against it, Nat. It's going to be the biggest war the world has ever seen. They say we had a hundred thousand men at the front a fortnight after war was declared, and there will be three hundred thousand men in France by hook or by crook before Christmas. The Belgians have held up the Germans like heroes; but they are done for now. I'm off with my regiment to-morrow from Canterbury."

"Good for you! I enlist next week. It's just a question what I'm best suited for with my great size and strength."

"The artillery, that's your arm, I reckon—the H.A.C. if you can. Don't you come on now, Nat. I'm bound for Tenterden—in the deuce of a hurry too—and I can go faster than you."

"Stop a minute then. Look here, Nick. You know what's been between us. It just happened—God knows I'd not have willed it, but——"

"Better leave that. I understand about it. It's each for himself in that quarter—and Devil take the hindmost."

"It was for her to decide, old chap—and she has."

"She has not—not yet."

"She did to-day. I'm the lucky one, Nick. She loves me and she's going to marry me."

They were standing still as Nathan spoke, and the younger fell back from him a pace. For a moment it

seemed that he hardly understood. Then the truth gripped him; a flush of hot blood rolled over his face, and passion darkened it. He clenched his fists, tightened every muscle, and looked as though he were going to fly at Pomfret.

Nathan watched him, but did not speak again.

"You dirty blackguard—to do this behind my back!"

"Can you call me a blackguard, Nick? It's straightforward enough—just life and fate. All was fair and honest. I couldn't give you what wasn't mine to give. I couldn't take from you what wasn't yours. She chose between us, and well you know she couldn't wed you, for she told you thrice."

"Liar! You've gone behind my back—you've——"

"Think—think! Think what you're saying. You'll be ruling men in a minute—with life or death hanging to your orders. Then rule yourself before this bad fortune. Use your reason, or nothing will save you. The way was all open. I did no dishonourable or crooked thing. I might as well blame you for loving her as you should blame me for doing it. There's no blame anywhere, but only fate in it; and if it was anybody but me, you'd see it."

The other had gone from red to white.

"Easy to talk. Your heart's not torn out. This isn't the end. You've fought foul, and you're a traitor to your own brother, and I'll hear it from her before I'll believe it—and—and—I won't believe it then. She was getting to care for me—she said so—she always did care for me—she said so—and then, because I'm called to do man's work at the critical moment, and you know I'm out of the way, you creep over to her and poison her ears against me with cursed lies—and——"

"God forgive you, Nicholas, I'll go. I'll leave you. You're mad, and when you've come to your senses, remember who I am, and look back a bit as well as forward. If ever you've had to call upon your reason and honour and manhood, call upon them now."

"Preach—preach to the man you've wronged. Easy to preach. Where's your honour and manhood? In the dirt! You're a mean scoundrel, and when I've got a bullet through my head——"

He stopped, but his brother was not angered.

"Well may you stop," said Nathan. "Well may your tongue refuse to talk like that to me, Nicholas. I'll hear no more, and save you the shame of remembering any more such trash. You, a Crowns, to be bleating—a Crowns in khaki to be talking like a fool! Go home and think upon what you're saying, and be a man again. Nothing—nothing justifies what you've said to me—my own brother, and the light of my eye always, to call me a scoundrel. Get back, Nick—get home and think on what you've done."

The other cursed him furiously, but Nathan stayed no longer. He turned and walked away, nor did he stop to see whether Nicholas proceeded to Tenterden, or took his advice and went home.

For his own part, Pomfret was terribly cast down, and, despite his firm reprimand, suffered very deeply. For a time reason fainted, and he yearned for Nick's former regard, and mourned the catastrophe that had robbed him of it; but, before he was home again, he had readjusted the outlook, and perceived that in reality he had no cause for remorse. Self-sacrifice was always impossible in this matter, and only the folly of Nicholas in persisting after he had received 'no' for an answer—only the blindness of Nicholas and his failure to read Rosa May's character—could have made him continue to hope despite Rosa May's repeated denials. He had had ample opportunity to alter her mind and a free hand to court her; and he should have known that such a girl was not to be changed by mere persistence on the part of any man. He had, in fact, behaved like a fool; yet he deserved the pity that his brother felt for him. That Nathan well knew, and in the measure of his own happiness and triumph, the victor

balanced this disappointment. He remembered Nick's sanguine and fiery temper, and made generous allowance for the crushing effect that such an overthrow of hope must produce.

Doubtless the future looked unutterably black to Nicholas. It was possible that he would now go into the war indifferent as to whether he lived or died. Pomfret dwelt upon this gloomy picture, and became depressed again after temporary recovery. That Nicholas should go to France unreconciled was not to be thought upon; yet what steps might his brother take? Nathan had nothing to say, and Nicholas probably would refuse, in his present temper, to call back one word of his outrageous speeches. The elder wondered whether he had gone to see Rosa May, and rather hoped that he had done so. For she, with her tact and skill, and in the light of her present happiness, might be trusted to say the right word, waken the disappointed lover's reason, and help him to recover his self-control. So at least thought Pomfret, but his brother knew better: Nicholas felt, even in the full wind of his wrath, that this was no time for seeing Rosa May. Indeed, he assured himself that he never wanted to see her again. From her no anodyne was likely to flow for him, and when his brother left him, he returned to Hill Crest.

It was there that a fellow-creature restored his balance in a manner very unexpected, for his mother came to the rescue, and the manner of her attack and victory must have much amazed all who had witnessed her former solicitation and deep desire that Nicholas should have his way.

It was not until after midnight, however, that any news reached Pomfret. He brooded long, and, once only, during his reflections, spared a thought to himself. It centred in deep regret that on the day of his supreme happiness, his mother should not have heard it from him. She, of all, ought to be the first to learn it, yet the accident of meeting Jenny and the subsequent speech with Nicholas

had put her out of his head. He could not tell her now, though doubtless she knew all about his triumph from his sister. Then occurred to him the thought that she might have held his betrothal no triumph, but viewed it with the eyes of Nicholas.

Nathan did not retire until he had decided upon a course of action. Then he determined to see Nicholas again at daybreak on the following morning. Upon that he went to bed, but could not sleep, and was still awake when, about two o'clock, he heard the sound of gravel thrown against his bedroom window. Thinking it must be Nicholas, he leapt to answer, but a great cloaked figure stood beneath in the Bugle rose bushes, and he knew that it was his mother.

"Good Lord, mother!"

"Come down and let me in," she said, and he pulled on his coat and breeches and hastened to the door.

"What's amiss?" he asked.

"You can ask that—and England at war with Germany!" she answered, blinking at the candle he had lighted. "There it is in a nut-shell—the biggest thing happening to the world that ever did happen to it, and yet my sons—*my* sons are forgetting their duty to God and man and squabbling over a woman. I'm fairly beat. I'm——"

"You haven't come to talk like this, surely? We're not forgetting our duty. Things hurtle together so. Jenny told you that Rosa May was going to marry me?"

"I can't talk much more," she answered, "for I've been talking without stopping since sundown; and it's not an hour ago that I talked Nicholas to his bed. And then I went to my own, but thinking on you—though you weren't worth it, seemingly—I had to come out, for I knew you'd be waking and all upside down in your mind."

"Did he go to Tenterden?"

"He did not. He did a sensible thing and came home to me. And then I got on to him. I properly scorned him for thinking about such a thing as a girl at such a

time; and I properly scorn you for the same reason. It passes belief that either of you should have a woman in your mind while the nation's up against life or death. I never heard of anything so unmanly in my life. It's all women you've got to think of now, not just one. All women, and children too. Let the Germans come here and they'll cut our throats like sheep, and our white roads will run red with women's blood—women and children. And in the meantime, while Germany's trying to knock in the door, my sons are falling out about a twopenny-halfpenny wife, instead of thinking for their mother! I said that to Nick, and I say it to you. Soon enough to talk about nonsense like wives, when your homes and mothers and sisters are safe, and these mad bloodhounds knocked on the head, or driven back into their kennels. It's up and at the Germans now for everything calling itself a man!"

"But Nicholas?"

"He saw it. I hated to lower myself to talk about such a thing, but he saw it. I made him. It's small beer, God knows, to prattle about the likes and dislikes of a wretched girl, when your heart and mouth are full of Belgium and the everlasting history all decent Englishmen are going to be called to make; but I lowered myself to the subject and rubbed it into Nicholas with what patience I could that if Rosa May wants to marry you and you want to marry her, that's an end of it so far as he's concerned. He talked a bit of nonsense about you coming between and so on; but for once I hadn't patience to listen to the man. It's natural Rosa May should feel torn in half between my two sons—I grant that; but she couldn't have both, and she liked you best—though God knows whether either of you are worth a thought. Time will show. And you've got her promise. I wore him down—Nicholas. I said that his father's son must be out for honour and glory now, and not waste more time and thought on his little private affairs. I made him take a bigger

view of man's duty. I lifted him. I worked at him for six hours. He's a soldier in future, and never will be a hop-master again while there's a German alive. So much for him. And now what about you? Am I to say I've got a son a dairy-farmer, and look up in the sky and wait to see German flying machines dropping bombs on my head?"

"D'you need to ask that? I was going to see Nick first thing this morning."

"Give me a glass of beer. Beer, I say. Lord knows I've earned it. I shan't have gout till the war's over—not if my sons are at their posts. Failing that, I'd as soon die as not. No time for the flesh to ache while the mind's up in arms. You can't see him to-morrow, because he's going by the five o'clock train to Canterbury, and he'll be on his way to France before you're waking. He's sorry he dressed you down so. He seemed to think losing Rosa May was the end of the world to him, till I showed him this war's the beginning of the world to every decent Englishman. He knows he's born at last; and so shall you. And when the new world's smoothed out a bit, Nick will be somebody in it, I hope, and doubtless get his pick of wives if he wants 'em."

She ceased, and Nathan went out and drew a glass of beer from a barrel.

"I'll be round at the station," he said as she drank. "I'm going to Canterbury to enlist. We'll go together. Nick says I ought to go into the artillery with my strength."

"The slowness! Why aren't you in it already, and working day and night to learn about it? And don't you come to the station. Jenny and I will see him off."

"I must come. I'll go to Canterbury with him."

"Let there be no more nonsense between you then. He's a soldier, and you'll be one in twenty-four hours if you're going on calling yourself my son; so let there be no more nonsense."

He saw her to the door presently.

"Has he got everything?"

"That reminds me. Those long-sight glasses of yours—used for looking at horse-racing. Horse-racing, indeed!"

"I'll bring them to the station for him."

He started to see his mother home; but she would not permit it.

"Not at all," she said. "Women are going to show men a thing or two before this war's done. When the men are gone, then we come in, and if we go back after the war where we stood before it, may God forgive us."

Pomfret was at the station first, and carried the binoculars. Jenny and her mother bade Nicholas farewell in the dewy grey of a wet September morning. Then the men travelled together.

Not until after nightfall did Pomfret come home and call at Hill Crest.

"All's well," he told them. "I saw him off with the troops, and I've joined the artillery. I go to work next week."

"And no silliness, I hope," said Mrs. Crowns, whose eyes were very red.

"No silliness, mother. We talked of the future, not the past, and parted—what we've always been, and always shall be—brothers."

CHAPTER XXX

THE WEDDING

THE great business of the hops cannot stand still, and though their master was far from the gardens of Hill Crest each autumnal month saw its appointed labour, and each day of winter its punctual task. With the end of the year came hop-pole cutting in the naked copses, and what young men had done swiftly, an older generation laboriously did; in February began the work that Rupert Swadling loved—the digging and dressing of the hops, the cleaning off of all dead stuff, and the pruning of the first young growths, not wanted yet to build up another year's brave panoply.

With March the poles were set once more, and the stringing began again. Fixing of poles and rigging of string was a great matter, and, for the first time in the history of Hill Crest, certain lithe and strong young women assisted the older men. Thirty hundredweight of cocoanut string went to Hill Crest's acres and wove a yellow web above the weald.

With May recognised female labour would begin, and Nina, and Milly, and Susan, and their friends find work at tying the infant vines to their poles. With rushes would they tie; and the upspringing hops, thus started on their way, soon climb without further help to the cordage aloft. Rush-cutting belonged to July, when the Mill Pool rushes were at their toughest, and ready to be reaped and stored for the next year's tying. With June, or earlier, the growing hops received fresh stimulant, and artificial foods were chopped generously into each hill. Swadling

always finished his chopping in May, and devoted succeeding months to the "shim"—a sort of harrow with which he bored through the alleys, and loosened the soil, and kept each garden sweet and clean. Then followed spraying and cleansing of the crop and the season of fruition again; while, elsewhere, hops destined to furnish new gardens were hilled in for "setts," or cuttings.

The winter brought interminable rains, and Mr. Swadling, who wrote once a week to his master, drew mournful pictures of the half-drowned weald. For a wet winter is hated alike by hops and hop-growers.

Winter dragged her soaking skirts away, and now was spring again. Nicholas Crowns still stood at the front unharmed. He had seen much service, and won promotion and a "D.S.O." He might have come home for a respite, yet did not do so. His mother bade him come, but he made excuses for postponing his return.

Even for Nathan's marriage he would not come, though Mrs. Crowns guessed that he might do so after that event.

On a bright and blustering morning of early March, Pomfret wedded Rosa May. His training had been completed, and the time approached when he would go to France; but he desired that Rosa May should reign at Bugle first.

The girls and men poleing and stringing in the Hill Crest gardens left their work suddenly and hastened to the hedge, for the wedding was afoot.

Nina Honeysett with her aunt stood at a gate beside Eli Samson and Billy Beken, while, not far off, in a gap, Milly and Susan Daynes waved their hands, and Rupert Swadling his cap. But only the spectacle of one carriage drawn by a pair of grey horses rewarded them. The driver wore a "favour," however, and upon his whip was a bunch of white ribbons. In the open carriage sat Georgina Crowns, her daughter, Jenny, and her son, Nathan.

Pomfret returned the salutations from hedge and gate. He laughed and nodded. It was to be a soldier's wedding,

and he wore khaki. His ladies were brightly attired, but Mrs. Crowns looked severe. She had imparted a military touch to her appearance since the war, and spent most of her time at a little hospital for wounded soldiers at St. Michael's. Swiftly the grey horses sped away, and the people in the gardens spoke to each other.

"There won't be a marriageable man left in Kent by midsummer," said Susan Daynes; "there's Milly's Ernest gone now, and Nina's Henry's going next month, and every other girl's chap is gone or going."

Eli Samson nodded.

"Undoubtedly so," he said, "and for my part I could weep tears of blood to think of all they fine young men, and millions more, giving up their lives for us old chaps."

"'Tisn't for you or me—'tis for the country at large," declared Sarah Dunk. "They're Englishmen, and behave according."

"You're a woman and can't understand," answered Eli. "It's right and proper they should fight for England and the females and little ones; but what I feel is that men who have enjoyed life and all its fulness, like me, should have to thank all these grand boys for giving up their spring for our winter. God knows if I could die to keep just one of them alive, I'd thankfully do so. And, of course, countless thousands of us old men feel the same. I hope they'll find a use for us presently, for such as Beken and me might well do something for the nation, if only cleverer men will tell us what to do."

"What does 'D.S.O.' stand for, Billy?" asked Susan Daynes. "Captain Crowns has been made that, and we were wondering."

"'Damn smart officer,' I should think," answered Mr. Beken; "but if he's spared to see the end of the war, you may be certain he'll rise to higher things yet."

"He'll never sink to a jog-trot hop-grower no more. He'll be a soldier to the end of his days, mark me," prophesied Miss Dunk.

Elsewhere Nathan spoke to his mother.

"Strange to see the women stringing and poleing," he said.

"Only for the minute," she answered. "It won't be strange next year. It's all coming true what I said. The war's opening our eyes and enlarging our minds about women's work, and what women can do and what they cannot. We're just beginning to find ourselves. And, as I've always argued against many who have said I was wrong, but couldn't prove it, I still say: that man's work isn't woman's work; and if women can run a hop-garden with a few old male beetles, like Swadling and Beken, to help them, then hops are their work, and men must never sink to it again."

"But at that rate you'd drive men out of everything, mother," said Jenny.

"It's up to the men," answered Mrs. Crowns. "If they can't take refuge in higher branches of labour or learning, beyond the strength or the wits of women to follow 'em, then let them get out or get under, as the saying is. And if they can't find any such new channels, but have to admit that most of the work of the world can be done as well by women as men, then let's have no more nonsense about inequality of the sexes. For then it comes to this: that women can do very nearly all that men can do, as well as a lot that men cannot do; and if once they can drive that home, then, according to all fairness and reason, they ought to share the first place. The mothers of heroes are just as important as the heroes themselves, if not more so, for to get the hero, you've got to get his mother first."

"And his father," said Jenny.

"No doubt; but it's well understood that heroes owe most to their mothers," answered Mrs. Crowns; "I'm not saying it for woman pride, but truth's truth. Great heroes always have great mothers; and I believe you'll find, on the other hand, that great rascals generally get it through their fathers."

Neither her son nor her daughter was prepared to combat this tremendous theory; but instead of further speech, the bells of Tenterden began to chime upon their ears, and soon they reached the township on the hill.

At the church Nathan alighted and found his best man waiting for him in khaki; while Mrs. Crowns and Jenny drove to the Witherdens'. For Jenny was to be Rosa May's sole bridesmaid. Canute Witherden wore a frock-coat, a blue tie, grey trousers, and a white carnation in his button-hole. He had long become resigned to the match. He was melancholy, however, for Rosa May intended to live at Bugle after her marriage, and he felt that he must greatly miss her.

"Sit down," said Mr. Witherden, when Jenny arrived with her mother. "She won't be long. There is to be no ceremony. So all four of us can drive across in the carriage. To the last she continues to be obdurate concerning her gown; but in my opinion these people, who always try to be unconventional, are really much vainer and self-conscious than we others, who are contented to behave in the same way as our neighbours."

"It isn't a time for expenditure," declared Mrs. Crowns. "The end of the war's not in sight yet, and your money's better spent upon the nation than flung away on a wedding."

"Is it true that they are to leave the church under an avenue of drawn swords?" asked Mr. Witherden. "If so, that's something, and lends an interest and helps to make the nuptials historical."

"Quite untrue," declared Mrs. Crowns. "Time enough for drawn swords when heroes are married. Second lieutenants don't have swords at their weddings. Nathan wouldn't allow it for a minute. If it had been Nicholas, with his D.S.O., no doubt an avenue of drawn swords would have been very proper; and Nathan will make his mark as sure as he's born. But he's got to make it first."

Mr. Witherden sighed.

"I have fallen in with the wishes of the bride and

bridegroom," he said. "Indeed, my uneventful rôle in life is to do nothing but fall in with the wishes of other people; though sometimes I catch myself wondering whether it is the most dignified procedure—especially as it seems a physical and moral impossibility for anybody to fall in with my wishes. But they expressed a desire to have a very modest and humble little wedding breakfast at the 'White Lion.' Therefore a humble little wedding breakfast at the 'White Lion' has been prepared. Here she is. She wished to be married in her going away dress, if you can believe it, but the worm will turn. On hearing that, I put my foot down and declined to attend the ceremony if there were not a white marriage garment and a subsequent travelling dress. She consented, unwillingly."

Rosa May looked very fair in a plain white gown with a veil. Mr. Witherden had been at secret expense for orange blossom, and she wore a bunch at her breast. It sent up its fragrance as Mrs. Crowns kissed her.

Her father looked at Rosa May and shook his head.

"Far too primitive," he said. "Did I not know you were about to be married, Rosa May, I should say without hesitation that you were merely going to be confirmed."

"Nat will like it," she answered.

The bells began to chime; Mr. Witherden gave Rosa May his arm down the garden path, and observed that a little crowd had collected at the wicket-gate, where stood the carriage and the pair of greys.

At church a larger crowd awaited them, and the mighty shoulders of Nathan heaved up from a seat in the choir as they arrived. Mrs. Crowns subsided with friends in a front pew near the lectern, while Jenny and Mr. Witherden conducted Rosa May to the altar rails. There Nathan met her.

The church was nearly full, for Pomfret had many friends, and Mrs. Crowns and Jenny many more. It was a source of very real satisfaction to Mr. Witherden that Nathan's commanding officer, a soldier with a famous

Kentish name, attended the ceremony and signed the register.

To the Wedding March went man and wife presently; and contrasted with the large congregation, the organ music and clashing of bells, there is no doubt that the subsequent entertainment seemed tame. Canute even called it an "anti-climax."

"To cap my discomfiture the solitary guest sanctioned by these tyrants cannot come," explained Mr. Witherden. "Only yesterday I heard from Mr. Fuggles that he was taken with a cold upon the chest—bronchitis, in fact."

"And you are to go and see him before we start, Nat," said Rosa May. "I went over yesterday, when I heard he was ill, and he gave me his lovely wedding present, and told me that he expected you. He's not very bad, but too bad to come out."

Needless to say, Mr. Witherden had provided the perfection of a wedding breakfast. All congratulated him heartily, and all admitted that it was a pity more guests were not present to enjoy so dainty a repast. The bride's father made a speech, proposing the health and happiness of the wedded pair, but otherwise there were no formalities. Mrs. Crowns was gouty, and would eat and drink but little; and Nathan also did but small justice to the banquet.

He would not even stay to smoke a cigar afterwards, for he was anxious to make his farewell of Martin Fuggles.

The honeymoon of three days was to be spent in London, and then, after another day or two at home, Nathan would leave for France.

"The whole thing is a burlesque and travesty of what any wedding should be, not to mention my daughter's wedding," declared Canute, as the bridegroom hurried off and Rosa May drove home with Jenny to change her wedding gown.

"War's war, my dear man, and you needn't think that even weddings will ever be the same again," answered Mrs. Crowns. "The entire face of the world is going to

be changed, and, for my part, I don't expect to see anything but khaki on the men for the rest of my natural life. This war's only just begun. There's boys at school to-day who will fight for their country before we see the end of Germany. I'll even say more than that; and it wouldn't surprise me if, before the war's ended, you and I are the grandparents of a hero."

"You may be," he answered; "but I shall not. It is exceedingly certain that I shall not live for another twenty years. My constitution promises nothing of the kind. Nor do I wish to do so, if the war is to last all that time. I would rather be taken from the evil to come. In fact, I have already had far more than enough of the war. It is a most demoralising state of affairs, and threatens one's self-respect. I find it very difficult not to despair of human nature."

"It's human nature we're fighting for," answered Mrs. Crowns. "The Germans have forgot they are human beings. It's because they've let loose their filthy, four-footed manners in the world and are behaving like wolves and tigers would behave if they had brains—it's for that reason all decent nations are rising up in their might to smash them—not in our own name, Canute Witherden, but in the name of humanity and civilisation. And we shall do it as sure as God's in heaven."

"And yet they have the insolence to call on God to punish England," murmured Canute.

"Yes—because they know right well by now they can't do it themselves," answered Mrs. Crowns.

CHAPTER XXXI

THE OPTIMIST

MR. FUGGLES was sitting up in his bedroom. He wore a wool dressing-gown and a white wool cap. He croaked and expectorated, but he was cheerful, wished Nathan all future happiness, and expressed great regret at being forced to miss the wedding.

"Tell Jenny to come and give me all particulars," he said. "I shall recover pretty soon. If the mind is occupied and full of big things, it doesn't give the body a chance to be ill long. You can't be ill if your brain is healthy. I am working out a great scheme, which may be of the utmost value to England, and the activity of the brain will soon react on the physical health."

"That's something new," declared Nathan.

"And yet true. As to the scheme, it will interest you a great deal. I have now put before the Government a proposal connected with agriculture. It is, briefly, that every farmer, great and small, should be commanded to grow a certain proportion of wheat. Every farm, according to area, must be made to bear its ratio of corn. Every pightel of land must have its percentage of corn. Consider what that would mean. The Government, of course, to guarantee purchase."

"It sounds all right. I hope the authorities will agree with you."

"It not only sounds all right, but it is all right. Many things that we are compelled to do by law hold far less direct relation to the welfare of the State than growing of corn. My heart is set on it. The Government's given the hop-growers a fright, and I wish they'd had pluck to

go through, but they hadn't. Now let them talk to those who should be growing corn. I am working out figures, and the further I get, the more impressed I am with the importance of the proposition. It is little less than a scandal the way in which our output of corn has steadily fallen for generations."

Certain objections to the inspirations of Mr. Fuggles leapt to Pomfret's mind; but he was in no mood for argument and felt that the invalid must not be shaken from his enthusiasm. It might be doing him good and helping his recovery, as Mr. Fuggles himself declared.

Nathan therefore changed the subject.

"And what about your unborn? Have you dropped that business?"

"I had—for the very sufficient reason that Nature appeared to have taken it up. You'll find from time to time in the history of the world, Nat, that Nature gets impatient with civilisation and hits out at our folly, or cruelty, or wickedness. Then men like myself—full of humanist ideas—get a bit of our own back. Things appeared to be happening that bishops couldn't prevent, and even *The Times* couldn't control. The nation has been quite happy to let fifty thousand illegitimate little ones be born into England every year, and quite unprepared to do anything whatever to lessen the awful mortality among them; but now that a few thousand more were promised, England actually moved and gave a reluctant thought to them at last. It looked hopeful."

"The 'khaki' babies? But it's said there are none after all."

"Yet consider how wonderfully the bare threat of them worked! It was most instructive. These alleged babies were going to be born with haloes; and as we couldn't very well specialise in war babies, to the exclusion of the regular harvest of illegitimate peace babies, some sort of real move was to have been expected, and the whole question rationally tackled at the expense of the Church

and the Law. It's a curious fact, by the way, that when reason speaks, the Law or the Church is nearly always bound to squeak. At any rate, babies were at a premium for the moment, and Nature—the grand old pagan—doubtless couldn't believe that for once civilisation was smiling at her—though a sort of Sardinian smile—on the wrong side of the face, I grant. Civilisation didn't like it. Her lights and luminaries—her bishops and lawyers and reactionaries in general—disliked it very much. They couldn't trim for once, however—not Lambeth Palace nor the Law Courts. People were wailing in *The Times*—lawyers, of course. But, as a preliminary, they almost recognised that subsequent marriage must make legitimate. That was immensely promising. It would have put us on all fours with every civilised community in the world—an enormous advance from our present position. These blackguard Germans, by the way, are far ahead of us. In Germany it is not necessary that the father should marry the mother to make the child legitimate. Often such a course is not possible, therefore the Huns declare that it is enough if the father applies for legitimation of his child to the Public Authority. Goodness knows what they'll do now—infomed polygamy, I shouldn't wonder.”

“But the war babies are like the Russians in England—a myth.”

“And what a breath of relief has ascended! How thankful are Church and State and Law to hear that we shall not have more than our usual fifty thousand or so of helpless innocents to maltreat! But don't be deceived, Nat—the Law totters—the axe is at the root—there are brave spirits in the world who will not let the weak suffer for ever. And I still hope for some ripe fruit from this misbegotten war. After it, the little voices will be heard! Our laws at present offer nothing less than social damnation to bastard babies and their mothers; but the eternal law of creation may yet be recognised, and prove a factor strong enough to crush or modify our pettifogging statutes.”

"The sixth commandment is as clear as the seventh," said Pomfret, "but the world hasn't stood up for the sixth of late. In fact, all laws are going to rack as far as I can see—all but the law of self-preservation."

"War makes its own laws, and to hang on to words and oaths given in time of peace is childish weakness, when you're faced with an enemy who does not," declared Mr. Fuggles. "But all that's nothing. It won't alter the issue. Victory, not virtue, is what we want for the minute. The victor will make his own whitewash and apply it to his own performance afterwards, be sure. Let us keep our sanity and sense of perspective. War is killing good men like flies; and if war is making a few good babies at the same time, then for God's sake don't let us kill the babies too. I tell you these babies would have saved the situation for the illegitimate child, if there'd only been enough of them, and I wish there had been."

"We've agreed to go on racing, and so take care of the future of our race-horses; then why not look after our own progeny?" asked Pomfret.

"Exactly. Why not? And we shall do it—war babies or none—we shall do it yet. My unconquerable belief in my fellow-creatures is such that I still trust them to feel as kindly to a woman with child as a mare in foal. You may think that's optimism run mad; but I soar to that. There is only one way, and we must begin by reforming these evil regulations. We cannot outlaw the sacred seed of man any longer, or lift barriers between the innocent unborn and their rightful claims upon humanity."

"Government will never grant that any unmarried woman can be a legitimate mother in this country."

"Then to hell with Government," cried Mr. Fuggles, his white face for once flushed to pinkness. "If their cursed, secret diplomacy forces every man to turn into a soldier to save the nation from its enemies, then who shall dare deny the right of every woman to turn into a mother for the same noble purpose? Grant that, and not

principalities or powers either can come between; for it's the voice of Nature and human instinct, and what intrigue of lawyers or cackle of Churchmen shall ever cry those voices down?"

"Your heart runs away with your head, for all you're such a clever old bird," said Nathan, putting his great hand on the shoulder of Mr. Fuggles. "Leave it for time to put right. What about the war? Have you got any new ideas on that subject, Martin?"

"Yes, I have, and the first is to look at Germany with straight glasses. If we could show her where she's wrong, she'd stop fighting. If you could have showed the dog that what he saw in the water was only a reflection and not a real thing, he wouldn't have dropped his bone. For colonies they cry! What the mischief does any people want with colonies who is free of ours—free to live in 'em, trade in 'em, help to govern 'em, make a fortune out of 'em? A sane man doesn't pay rent for a shop if he can get it rent free. Prussia's told Germany so often that she can't get on without her, that Germany—poor fool—has learned to believe it. Her education for forty years has all been planned to that end. But a year hence she won't believe it any more. When she sees where Prussia has landed her trade and her credit and renown, she'll learn the truth of Prussia, and know the spirits of Frederick, the Mephistopheles, and Bismarck, the man-eater, and William, the maniac, were evil spirits. Each of these men took in seven devils more than the last!"

"The Prussians had to strike, I reckon," answered Nathan, "or Germany would have discovered that militarism was played out. That hawk, Prussia, was bound to bully the rest of the nation for the sake of her own hawk's existence."

"A hawk, yes. But do the rooks let a hawk build her nest in the rookery, or ask a hawk to rule their parliaments? Not they. The hawk that came among them would soon be torn to bits. Let the nations of men learn

from the nations of birds. Now listen to this, Pomfret—a prophecy by the great Heine. You never heard of him, but that's no matter."

Mr. Fuggles turned to an old leather-bound book and read from a marked passage:

" 'Christianity, and this is its highest merit, has in some degree softened, but it could not destroy, that brutal German love of battle. When once the taming talisman, the Cross, breaks in two, the savagery of the old fighters, the senseless Berserker fury of which the northern poets sing and say so much, will gush up anew. That talisman is decayed and the day will come when it will piteously collapse. Then the old stone gods will rise from the silent ruins and rub the dust of a thousand years from their eyes. Thor, with his giant's hammer, will at last spring up and shatter to pieces the Gothic cathedrals.' There! What do you think of that, my friend? "

"He knew, whoever he was," declared Nathan; then the other, shutting his book, spoke again.

"We English deceive our neighbours very curiously. Not on purpose, but simply because one country can't read another's character and genius. We, for example, are the only people who cry stinking fish round the world. By that I mean we run ourselves down, scoff at our army, our navy, our government; and Germany, who never made that mistake, takes us at our own valuation, and pays the price of her error."

Pomfret laughed.

"It's like a married man I know. He's never got a good word for his wife; but if any other man was to blame her, or say a word against her, he'd mighty soon have that husband at his throat. Same with our fox-hunters and fishermen, and game shots. The real swells never praise themselves, and laugh at anybody who does; but tell those sports that there's somebody in the next county who can wipe their eye and they'll be interested very quick. It's just a habit to run ourselves down, and Ger-

many, believing all she heard, was properly mad to find us pretty useful after all."

"And calls us a generation of liars in consequence," declared the invalid.

"What about conscription?"

"I'm for enforced service—to balance education. You don't understand that, but I'll explain. Education is making the people lawless. There's a danger that hasn't been pointed out. You lift the people to a high pitch of knowledge and explain all round that Jack's as good as his master and his master as good as Jack. That's all right, but what Jack doesn't know, and his master often doesn't know either, is that neither Jack nor his master is as good as England, or worth a damn without England behind them. The young men have a growing sense of their own importance as men, but a waning sense of their country's importance as a nation. It's all grabbing out of England, and no giving back to England with the lump of us English; and we use our increased wits for selfish ends. Education has shown us our power; but it hasn't showed us the solemn duty that must go with the power, if the power is to be kept up."

"The war's showing us all that."

"Love of England was running thin before this trouble," declared Mr. Fuggles. "I'm hopeful that the war will wake a new and stronger love. The Colonials brought us a better example—alive and burning bright."

"And we shook them up above a bit," confessed Nathan. "I've spoke with a good few fine chaps from Canada. They were properly staggered to find who was in khaki, and who was not, when first they came to Salisbury Plain. I suppose there's something to be said for education too. It tries to make us larger-minded and full of enthusiasm for humanity and above the accidents of race."

But Mr. Fuggles would not hear of this.

"Above the accidents of race! Thank God for such accidents—that's what I think. And that's why I ask

for conscription, to help the young men see they can't have anything for nothing. There's millions of us in this country have got England for nothing! Think of that! We've been born Englishmen for nothing. To be an Englishman—the son of the proudest, powerfulest race on God's earth—for nothing! To be content to be an Englishman and take the privilege as a matter of course. What an insult to your mother!"

Pomfret rose and clasped the other's hand.

"Good for you, Martin! I'm with you there. With all our faults and failings, it's something to be English to-day. It is something to look round the world and be English to-day. And it will be something bigger still a year hence. Too big a thing indeed to take for nothing—surely a thing to strengthen a man's mind with reverence and quicken his heart with pride."

"So be it. Good-bye, Nat. Be happy and then go to the wars and do your part with the best. Everybody's up against it to-day, from God on His throne to the smallest girl-child sewing buttons on a soldier's coat. We're re-casting the whole world in the crucible of this war, and if it's the Almighty's masterwork to see that the new-born earth shall roll sweeter and wiser through His heaven afterwards, it's ours, to the least of us, to help stoke the furnace fires and purge the dross from the melting-pot."

THE END.

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